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## Chapter 1 Harry goes to Work.

### Descent into Hell...

To say that the return to Privet Drive was uneventful would be a mistake. Vernon seethed and sputtered, muttering to himself, Petunia shivered in her seat and Dudley followed his mother's example sitting in the back. The source of their anxiety sat across from Dudley, staring numbly out the window and saying nothing.

Harry Potter sat in silence; to many, the Boy-Who-Lived was a hero, the hope of the wizarding world, but Harry knew better. He was hollow, an empty shell, devoid of any sort of happiness or joy, just sitting there as houses whizzed by.

It was barely a week ago that Harry lost his Godfather in a duel with Bellatrix Lestrange, a Death Eater and one of more than a dozen Death Eaters who had trapped Harry and his friends in the Ministry of Magic's department of Mysteries. His Godfather dead, all of his friends injured in that fight. Guilt, rage and despair waged war within his mind during that silent journey from King's Crossing to Privet Drive.

"BOY!" snarled Uncle Vernon. "You're going to earn your keep this summer! I've arranged for you to do some work for a new neighbor. He expects you to show up by 6:30 every morning and work 'til 5pm. ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME BOY?"

Harry turned his face away from the window and with just a hint of anger replied.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon."

"Good! We'll have a normal summer this year. I don't want to see any more of those freaks around here. Since you have to report in every three days, I'll see to it myself that you do!"

When the car pulled into number 4 Privet Drive, Harry was surprised to see a brown Hogwarts owl sitting on the fence, waiting for him, no doubt. Pulling his trunk from the boot, he quickly retrieved the letter and stuffed it into his pocket. He'd read that later once he was in his room.

He had barely closed the front door and turned to drag his trunk up to his room when he was flung into a wall by a blow to his back.

Uncle Vernon roared, "Don't you dare let me see any more of those freaky owls around here! I want you up every morning at 5:30 sharp and heading over to number 10 Privet Drive to see Mr. Parsons. I'll be earning 50 pounds a week for your work this summer."

Harry's anger flared briefly. *Great*, thought Harry, *now he's hiring me out to be a slave for other people.*

Depositing his trunk in his room, Harry sat on the small crib mattress, pulling his knees up and staring out the window. A small noise of parchment crinkling caught his attention. The letter from Hogwarts! Maybe it was going to tell him they'd get him out of here early he thought.

*Mr. Potter,*

*I realize this is probably not going to be received well by you, but Minister Fudge is being uncooperative and obstructing all attempts to beef up the Aurors. He's also making some noises about wanting to talk to you, maybe even hold a formal investigation into your "break-in" at the Ministry of Magic. I feel its best for all parties at this point if you remain with the Dursleys at Privet Drive for the entire summer. I've asked Remus Lupin and Ms Tonks to visit you periodically, but other than that we will keep contacts to a minimum. Please remember to keep sending your owl with your status every couple days. I strongly urge you not to send any owls to your friends, your owl is rather noticeable and we do not want it intercepted by the enemy.*

*Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

The parchment fell from Harry's numb hands and he sobbed quietly on his bed. "Sirius..."

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*The voices whispered to Harry, calling to him, beckoning him to come closer. The veil shimmered invitingly. Suddenly, Sirius Black's head pushed through the veil and gaunt arms reached to clutch him by his shoulders.*

*"You killed me Harry!"*

*"No Sirius, I didn't mean to... I didn't want it, I'm sooo sorry Sirius!"*

*"Hawwwy... little baby Harry wants to join his mangy godfather?"*

*Harry's head whipped up to see Bellatrix Lestrange holding a wand on him. He reached for his own wand and it wasn't there.*

*Suddenly the scene shifted and he was on the platform above the veil, Ron, Neville, Luna, Hermione and Ginny stood next to the veil. One by one they walked up to the veil and fell through it.*

*He tried as hard as he could to scream their names but no sound came out...*

Harry bolted up in his bed, screaming and sobbing "No, not Ron, not 'Mione, not Ginny!" Moonlight filtered through the torn curtain over his window casting pale shadows. Suddenly there was a pounding on the wall and he could hear his uncle bellowing. "Shut the bloody fuck up you wretched freak!"

Four A.M. in the morning and a thin pale wizard sat on his bed rocking back and forth sobbing quietly. His time in hell had barely begun.

## Harry's New Job...

Six in the Morning and Harry was standing in front of number 10 Privet Drive. Despite the predicted warm weather, Harry was wearing an old, oversized sweatshirt that Aunt Petunia gave him when it didn't fit Dudley anymore. His only comfort was his wand, safely tucked into a forearm holster. Despite the prohibition against underage magic, Harry decided he would not go unarmed this summer.

After ringing the bell twice he heard someone yell from inside the house. "Hold your horses! I'm a coming!"

The man who opened the door was tall, taller than Ron, and Ron had a couple inches over Harry at this point. Unlike Ron, he was heavily muscled; his hair closely cropped and touched with silver. On his arm was a tattoo unlike any Harry had ever seen before. The man seemed to have a problem with one leg as he walked with a cane, seemingly unable to bend that leg at the knee.

"You must be the Dursley's kid?" asked the man.

Harry sighed then replied, "Yes sir, I'm Harry."

The man thrust out a large hand and grabbed Harry's hand pumping strongly. "I'm Jack, Jack Parsons, just moved in a few weeks back. Your uncle said you would be looking for work this summer and with this gimpy old leg of mine I could use a helping hand."

Harry pulled his hand back and mentally counted the number of broken bones in it.

"Well come in! Come in! No sense hanging around out here Harry. I'm just setting up for some morning grub, have you had anything to eat yet?"

"No sir, I've not eaten yet."

"Well follow me, we'll rustle up some grub for you in the kitchen then get down to work."

Like the Dursley's house, there was a small living room off to one side of the corridor, the stairs to the second level of the house and the corridor leading to the kitchen. Interestingly enough the living room was filled with photos, photos of Jack in an unrecognizable uniform, and photos of aircraft. On one wall there was a glass case, which contained three small objects.

Harry followed Jack into the kitchen. Something smelled very, very good. Harry sat down at a small table and Jack placed a couple plates in front of him, some of which contained food Harry had never seen before.

"Excuse me Sir, but what is that?" He said pointing to thick chunky gravy. Gravy? For breakfast?

"Well Harry, you ain't lived 'til you've had Biscuit's n' Gravy! Good old-fashioned American breakfast food! Here, grab one of those biscuits and pour the gravy over it. As you can tell I'm not from these parts, I moved here barely a month ago. I'm still unpacking and settling in."

Harry carefully tasted the strange fare and his face lit up with a smile. "This is pretty good."

“Ok Harry, here’s what we’re going to be doing. I have two months to get this house in order before I have to start working. My company was nice enough to send me over here early so I could get set up, but I’m not able to do everything I want to do by myself, thanks to old gimpy here.” Jack thumped his leg with the cane and it made a metallic sound, causing Harry’s eyes to widen.

“How did you do that sir?”

“That’s a long story Harry, but the short version is I wasn’t watching where I put my foot during the last Gulf War and lost everything from the knee down. Wasn’t much fun, but war is like that. Anyway, what I’m going to need you to do is all the stuff I can’t do without needing both hands. That means a fair amount of lifting and moving stuff; I’ll need you to lay the marble slabs in the backyard. Your uncle says I’m supposed to pay him and not give the money to you, which seems kinda strange to me, but I’m not used to you Brits yet.”

Harry nodded and said nothing. Uncle Vernon would not want people to know he was taking his money and Harry didn’t want to risk Uncle Vernon getting angry again.

“Harry when you’re done with breakfast, you will find a pallet with a whole mess of marble slabs out back. Be careful with them, they weight about 50 pounds each, oh damn, umm... that’s about 20 kilos over here,” he said with a smile. “Take them out to the backyard and lay them out one at a time. Make sure they fit nice and tight to each other, I want to be able to put my BBQ out there and maybe a hot tub someday. I’ll call in you when its time for lunch, and I’ll have some cold drinks in the fridge that you can always come into the house to get.”

For the next several hours Harry moved the slabs, slowly covering the small grass plot. He thought it was strange, but then again, with that bad leg maybe Jack didn’t want to have to worry about mowing it. It was hot, exhausting work, but Jack made sure he took several breaks to rest and drink something.

At noon, Jack called Harry in for lunch. Over sandwiches, Jack talked to Harry about his job working for some American company that made military equipment. He tried to ask Harry several times about his school, but Harry gave him vague answers about a private boarding school up in the Scottish highlands. It was against the law to reveal anything to muggles about the wizarding world and Harry was coming to like this noisy American.

By mid afternoon, all of the tiles were in place and Harry felt like his arms had been stretched a full meter longer than they used to be. It was a marvel he wasn’t dragging his knuckles along the floor.

Jack called Harry in from the yard and handed him a cool drink.

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## Discoveries...

“Take a short break Harry, then I’d like you to move a few boxes up to the master bedroom. Once you’ve done that, we’ll call it quits for today. Maybe sit for a bit and shoot the shit. How’s that sound to you Harry?”

Harry looked startled. “Umm... shoot the shit? Sir?”

Jack chuckled and said “I mean we’ll talk Harry, I’ll tell you what I want you to do tomorrow, that sort of thing.”

Harry smiled and nodded, then muttered, “I think one of the things we’ll need to talk about is how you manage to mangle English.”

Jack laughed and said, “Just bring up the four large boxes from the basement to the master bedroom Harry.”

The boxes were large; it was hard for him to see where he was putting his feet while holding them. Bringing up the fourth box, Harry stumbled slightly entering the master bedroom and the box tipped over with a loud crash, spilling some of the contents to the floor. He scrambled to put everything back into the box, until something caught his eye.

“BLOODY HELL!”

Harry picked up the photo, clearly it was very old, but the really amazing thing was it was a wizarding photograph. The young woman in the picture waved at the camera. On her lap was an infant who she helped to wave at the camera.

Jack came thumping up into the room and froze when he saw Harry holding the photo. The color drained from his face

“Umm Harry I can explain that photo, you see it’s a...”

Harry looked at Jack, his anger rising, was Jack sent here by the order to watch over him? All he needed was another baby sitter to make his life more miserable.

“YOU’RE A WIZARD?” Harry demanded. “Did the Order send you to watch over me also? If so, you can go back to Dumbledore and tell him to fuck off; I don’t want his help anymore! He’s cost me too much of my life as it is!”

Harry was breathing heavily and waves of magic seemed to pour out of his body. The house seemed to groan and rumble like distant thunder.

“Whoa! Harry cool your jets. I’m not a wizard and I wasn’t sent here to by anyone to watch you. Calm down, and lets go into the living room to talk about this.”

Harry took a few deep breaths and tried to center himself, before following Jack down the stairs to the living room. He still clutched the photograph.

Jack sat down in a large chair and motioned to Harry to sit across from him on the couch.

“I’m not a wizard Harry. My father was one, but he married my mom who was a nonmag, and had me, another nonmag.”

Harry’s eyebrow raised in confusion “Nonmag? What’s that?”

Jack ran one hand over his head and said, “Well that’s what they call them in America. People who are born to wizards with little or no magic are called nonmags. Don’t ask me what they call them over here.”

“We call them squibs over here.”

“Harry, considering what you said up in the bedroom, I can tell you’re in some kind of trouble. If you don’t mind, I’d like to help if I can. Are you a squib also?”

“No, and that’s my problem. I’d give just about anything to be a muggle or even a squib at this point. I appreciate your offer of help Jack, but I’m not sure I’m ready to talk about it all just yet. Do you still want me to come over and do the work for you? I can’t legally perform magic yet so I have to do everything the muggle way. It’s illegal for someone my age to do magic except in the act of self defense, and even then it’s not always allowed.”

“Well magic or not, I still need things done around the house Harry, so I expect that you’ll be here bright and early. You don’t have to tell me anything, but I would like to hear more about your world. It’s been a long time since I was last in touch with the wizarding world.”

Harry thought about it, and then nodded. “I’ll be here everyday Jack.” To himself he added, *or Uncle Vernon will have my hide nailed to a wall.*

Harry returned to the Dursleys just before 5pm that day. Vernon wasn’t anywhere to be seen, and dinner was quite spare. Apparently Dudley’s diet wasn’t going well so Aunt Petunia decided to resort to a much stricter diet. Dudley’s whining resulted in Harry getting even smaller portions than Dudley did.

Over the next few days Harry and Jack continued to work on improving and fixing up his house. Jack took a more active roll in helping Harry. They discussed many things while they worked. Harry learned about Jack’s life in the military, ex Special Forces, wounded in combat and forced into an early retirement due to his disability. Jack learned about Hogwarts and about Harry’s trips to Diagon Alley.

Jack could tell that something was missing from Harry’s tales. He was very careful to omit certain details; he never said anything about his family or what was currently going on in the wizarding world. With his training in covert intelligence gathering, his instinct was that something was seriously wrong, but what it was, Harry hadn’t said.

On his fourth night back with the Dursleys, Vernon came into Harry’s room.

“BOY! Have you written that letter to your freakish friends yet? You know you need to send one at least once a week!” Vernon grabbed Harry painfully by one shoulder.

“Not... not yet Uncle Vernon.” Harry stammered.

Vernon punched Harry in the stomach, doubling him over and letting him fall to the floor. “Get up you piece of shit! Write what I tell you to write!”

Harry crawled over to the table that doubled as his desk and pulled out quill and parchment, hastily writing down what Vernon told him to write. He then attached the note to Hedwig and sent her on her way.

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### **Lies to the Order...**

At 12 Grimmauld Place, a snowy white owl ghosted down to an open window. Remus Lupin was on duty that night in the kitchen of the Order of the Phoenix. He smiled when he recognized Hedwig. Although not related to Harry in any way, he felt a bond of kinship to Harry. Harry was the son of one of his closest friends, and the Godson of another.

Spotting Remus, Hedwig ghosted over to him and landed in front of him.

“A letter from Harry? Well let me get it from you.”

Hedwig, normally a very placid owl, seemed more than a bit skittish tonight, nipping several times at Remus while he tried to remove the parchment. Finally relieved of her burden, Hedwig took to wing and flew out the window.

*She mustn't have expected any need to wait for a reply to this*, he thought. Shrugging, he unrolled the parchment and read.

*Dear Professor Moody & Professor Lupin,*  
*The Dursley's are treating me well. Uncle Vernon found me a job for the summer working for a neighbor. I'm well fed and feel fine. I'll keep sending owls every week if you want, but considering how well the Dursley's are treating me I don't think its really necessary.*  
Harry

Remus took the letter into the parlor and handed it to Moody who quickly scanned it over.

“Hmm, I'm glad to see SOMETHING is going right for that kid for once,” growled Moody.  
“Let's just keep him on this schedule for now. As long as we don't tell him otherwise, he'll keep sending us updates every week.”

Later that evening as Remus was starting to turn in for the night, he considered Harry's letter. Something didn't seem quite right about it, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. With a flick of his wand he extinguished the lights and settled into an uneasy sleep.

Over the next few weeks this became something of a ritual. Harry would spend his days working and talking to Jack. He was very interested in hearing about Jack's tales from the military, and Jack for his part, loved having such an attentive listener. Once a week, Vernon would dictate a letter to Harry, shouting and calling him names if he wasn't ready to send the letter on time. Vernon was careful not to hit him too hard, or in places that would be immediately obvious.

Everyday Jack and Harry would knock off work around three and spend a couple hours talking. In some respects, Jack's tales helped Harry work through his grief for Sirius. While Harry hadn't given Jack any specifics, Jack suspected from the way that Harry talked and acted, that he had lost someone recently and was still trying to come to grips with it. The friendship that was forming between Jack and Harry was finally cemented one day when Jack made a request of him after work.

"Harry, can I ask you something?" Jack said.

"Depends Jack. I guess you can."

"When I was little, before my mom died and my dad turned his back on the wizard world, we used to get something called a chocolate frog. Do you think it would be possible to get any? I haven't had any in years and would love to have some."

"Well I suppose you'd have to ask my Uncle Vernon about that. We'd have to travel to London, a couple hours away. I think if you told him you had to go there to pick up something for the house and needed me to carry stuff for you, he'd agree. I'd have to disguise myself though. I'm not supposed to go to Diagon Alley without a couple of escorts to watch over me, but I'm game if you are."

"Disguise yourself? What kind of disguise would you need?"

Harry pulled his hair away from his forehead revealing the lightning bolt scar that Jack had seen on several occasions.

"Well the scar is easy to hide; I have just the thing for that. I'll also loan you a pair of clip on sunglasses for your glasses. Your eyes are both striking in intensity and easy to spot. Wait here a sec." Jack left the room. A few minutes later Jack returned with a ball cap, embroidered with a blazing gold lettering and a picture of a ship, USS BLUE RIDGE, LCC 19.

"Keep it Harry. It will hide the scar and keep the sun out of your eyes. Besides I have caps from several ships I've been on over the years, I won't miss that one."

Harry was stunned. It was a beautiful, midnight black with gold lettering. It was nothing like the hats wizards wore, but it was one of the nicest gifts he had ever been given! He tried to stammer out his thanks to Jack.

"Don't worry about it Harry. How about if I walk you home tonight to talk to your Uncle about a trip to London tomorrow?"

A few minutes later Jack and Harry entered the Dursley's house. Jack wasn't sure exactly what the heck was going on, but Harry seemed to change as they entered the house. His attitude swung a full 180 degrees and seemed to lose all of his confidence as he told his Uncle that Mr. Parsons wished to talk to him.

Vernon Dursley looked up from his dinner plate and, spotting Harry and Jack, he immediately started getting red in the face.



“What did that boy do this time?” he demanded.

Harry flinched.

Jack was wondering what the hell was going on, but he pushed on anyway. “Nothing wrong Mr. Dursley, in fact it’s quite the opposite. Harry’s been a great worker for me. I only came over because I have to pick up some supplies tomorrow and could use Harry’s help loading up the car. Would you mind very much if I took him into London with me?”

Vernon glared down at Harry for a moment, and then smiled at Jack saying, “Well I’m glad he’s working out so well for you! Take him anytime you need him. He’s good for heavy work like that!”

Jack nodded, smiling back while Vernon walked him to the door. Harry scurried around to his seat at the counter for another meager meal.

Jack returned home and slumped down in his favorite chair. Something was definitely not right in the Dursley household. His instincts screamed that at him. He was no expert on teenagers, but even he could see something was wrong. Harry seemed to be terrified of Vernon Dursley. Whatever the problem was, he’d have to go slow prying it out of Harry. The poor kid would probably close down completely if he pushed him too hard. No, it would be best if he could just provide Harry with the friendship he seemed to need to desperately.

The next morning Harry woke to a bright sunny day. He knew he was disobeying Dumbledore by going with Jack and it gave him a giddy sense of freedom. This was almost as much fun as skiving off classes!

The drive to London was uneventful, the pair talked about what they’d need to do. Harry explained that first Jack would have to go to Gringots to exchange pounds for galleons. While Jack was exchanging his money, Harry would get some from his vault. They both knew they couldn’t stay long in Diagon Alley, so they’d get the money dealt with, and then they’d go to the Diagon Alley location for Honeydukes. Jack did have a need to pick up a few items in London, but nothing really major.

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### **Gringots...**

Jack was amazed by Diagon alley, but like any other trained professional he went about his task following Harry straight to Gringots. Gringots was fairly busy today, so Harry agreed to meet Jack just inside the entrance after he had visited his vault. Stepping up to the counter he told the goblin “I’d like to visit my vault please.”

“Name?” asked the goblin.

“Potter.”

“Follow me please.”

They boarded a trolley but instead of zooming off to the depths of Gringots, the trolley went a short distance and didn't seem to descend at all. "Potter Family Vault, watch your step exiting the cart," said the Goblin.

Harry was confused. This wasn't his usual vault. The doors he faced were huge; the doors carved with the signet crest of the Potter Family, a griffon with a Phoenix perched on its back. Harry took a step forward towards the massive doors wondering if his key would even work on these, when the doors slid silently open. *Must be blood magic*, he thought. *The doors are keyed to only open to blood members of the Potter family. Hermione would love this!* It was very old, very strong magic of the highest order.

Stepping inside he looked around briefly. The vault was filled with money, paintings, even furniture. Sitting right near the entrance was a small black box with a note attached to it reading "FOR HARRY". Harry knew he didn't have much time so he scooped up some galleons for his moneybag and grabbed the box.

Less than two hours later Harry and Jack were heading back to Surrey, the trunk loaded with one case of chocolate frogs, and on Harry's advice, two cases of Butterbeer. What Harry didn't know was Jack had grabbed what looked like several official pamphlets and today's edition of the Prophet. Jack asked about the box Harry was carrying, but Harry didn't know what was in it, all he could say was it was in his vault with a note saying he was supposed to get it.

Arriving at 10 Privet Drive, Jack suggested they make lunch and talk about a few things, which sounded really good to Harry. It had been weeks since his last Butterbeer. Harry really wanted to talk to Jack about an idea that had been slowly forming ever since Jack started telling him some of his war stories.

"Jack?"

"Yeah Harry?"

"You've been in wars haven't you?"

"Yeah kid. I've seen more than my share of bad times. Why do you ask?"

"I'm just wondering about something. In the wizarding world, wars seem pretty crazy, but your stories don't sound anything like that. You talk about fire teams and fields of fire and all sorts of stuff I've never heard of before."

Jack chuckled. "Let me tell you Harry, war is chaotic. Its no fun, people get hurt all the time. No matter how well you plan, as soon as the shooting starts your plan gets tossed out the window. The big difference is a well trained group can always overcome an unorganized mob."

Sighing, Jack shook his head and continued. "I remember my dad talking about it. He described a wizard fight like a wild west show with spells flying everywhere; no one coordinates so it's pure chaos. Putting order to that chaos would require training, teams designed to work together. Each person needs to know exactly what their job is and how to do it."

Harry thought about this for a while then nodded. "Can we talk about this more again sometime Jack? You have given me an idea that just might be useful."

"Sure kid, if you want to listen to this broken down warhorse talk about the glory days, I'll go along with it."

"Well its getting late Jack, if you don't mind I'll leave the Butterbeers here. Uncle Vernon doesn't like to see that kind of stuff in his house. See you tomorrow Jack!"

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### **Lily's Letter...**

Harry grabbed his box and headed back to the Dursley's.

Hurrying home Harry crept into the house. He was in luck; the Dursley's weren't home. Harry slipped into his room and sitting on his bed he examined the note and box carefully. The note didn't say much, just "FOR HARRY". He couldn't even tell whose handwriting it was. The box was just a box. It was fancy inasmuch as it had the Potter crest carved onto the top, but it didn't seem special. Strangely enough there didn't seem to be anyway to open the box. There weren't any visible seams, just the crest on one face of the box. Tracing his fingers along the crest his thumb dipped into a barely noticeable indentation. The box started to vibrate, and then the top slid silently open revealing a letter addressed:

Harry Potter  
4 Privet Drive  
Dudley's Old Toy Room...

Under the letter, lay a book.

Harry pulled the letter from the box wondering whom it was from. Sirius? Opening the envelope, Harry pulled out the letter and sat, uncomprehending for a moment. It was blank! But slowly, as if a hand were writing the letter in front of his eyes, words started to appear in a flourishing, very feminine script.

*Harry,  
I must say I am surprised it took you this long to find the family vault. Why you were not told of its existence before now is puzzling, although I have my suspicions! But I will come to that in a bit. First, there are things you must know.*

*First and foremost, your father and I are very proud of you, Harry. Not for what you are, but for who you've become. You need to understand that while you may not be able to see us, we can see you.*

The script stopped as Harry's vision grew blurry. The rational, logical part of his mind told him that his parents were gone. But he'd always secretly hoped that his parents had watched over him, even though they couldn't be with him.

Using his sweatshirt to wipe the tears away, he looked down at the letter in his hands, and the script started to appear again.

*We've watched you grow and adapt to the wizarding world of which you knew nothing before your 11th birthday. We watched you struggle to accept the awesome responsibility that's been laid upon your shoulders, through no fault of your own. We've seen you play Quidditch and your father can't stop talking about what a Seeker you are! James, I can't write this and listen to you at the same time! The way you handled that Umbridge woman last year in forming the DA? Wonderful! Oh, and tell the Weasley twins that we very much enjoyed their portable swamp, although my favorite were the charmed fireworks.*

Harry stopped in shock. His father was there as well? Holding the parchment tighter, he reread the paragraph. His father was there! He grinned stupidly, and then started to laugh. The portable swamp had been a stroke of genius. Even Flitwick loved it!

*Now we must move on to less pleasant things, love. This is information you must know, Harry. And while painful, it is necessary for you to understand, so that you may protect yourself. James, don't you scowl at me. We both agreed he must know this!*

*I watched, frantic and angrier than I've ever been when Dumbledore sent you to live with the Dursleys. Your father and I left specific instructions that under no circumstances were you to live with my sister and her husband!*

Harry started to scowl. Dumbledore. Oh yes, there were many things Dumbledore had done that he was sure his parents wouldn't have approved of. But what difference did it really make? They were gone now. And Dumbledore played Harry like a puppet on the strings, dancing to the tune the Headmaster set, never mind how Harry felt about it!

Realizing he was dangerously close to crushing the parchment, he went back to reading.

*Sirius was to be your guardian, it was his right as your godfather and I have no doubts you would have been happy. After he was blamed for our deaths and sent to Azkaban, Remus Lupin would have become your guardian. Mind you, this was all planned before we left for Godric Hollow, well before all that anti-werewolf legislation nonsense! But Dumbledore ignored our wishes in this and refused, flat out, to allow you to go anywhere but Privet Drive. He may patter on about "Blood Magic" all he wants, and while it IS powerful protective magic, it was NOT meant to keep you locked up in an abusive environment! He knew this, and knew what type of people he was leaving you with.*

Oh Merlin! His parents saw that? They saw what Uncle Vernon had done to him? Feeling the tears slide down his face, he didn't try to stop them. Memories flashed through his mind of every slap, punch and kick he'd received from his uncle and cousin. Every harsh word, every insult to his parents rang in his ears. And he'd done nothing to stop it. He'd done nothing to defend his parents! Well, there had been Aunt Marge, but that was an accident.

Wiping his face with his sleeve, he turned back to the letter.

*Harry, you stop that right now! You are not at fault for what the Dursley's did! You were a child, for Merlin's sake! Now pay attention, my green eyed devil. Did you know I used to call you that? Well, I did. Now, to continue...*

*Perhaps Dumbledore thought he could look out for your interests at Privet Drive. I do not know. If that was the case however, he failed miserably! If I could be there now, I'd use your Ginny's*

*bat bogey hex on him. And don't give me that look young man! You may not be ready to tell Ginny how you feel about her, but that doesn't mean you can hide it from your mother!*

Harry was shocked at his mother's comment. *My Ginny?* Well, it was true that he'd taken a much greater interest in Ginny over the past year. Who wouldn't? She was beautiful. Feisty too! And she was so gorgeous when she was angry. And for some reason he couldn't seem to stop looking at her red hair.

Shaking his head, he realized he must look pretty stupid, going cow eyed over a girl who wasn't even in the room. Sheepishly, he dropped his eyes to the parchment and the writing continued.

*Be very careful who you trust, Harry. Not everyone around you is looking out for your best interests, no matter what they may tell you. Ron and Hermione are loyal to you, as are Neville, Luna and your Ginny. Never doubt that. Remus thinks of you as a son, and would never betray you. Trust his instincts! Your friends will be your greatest source of strength, Harry. You will need them more in the coming years than ever before. Do not push them away. Lean on them, listen to their counsel and hold them close.*

*Now, to the book! Your father left this for you, and while I wasn't happy about it then, I must concede that you may find many things within its pages to be helpful and enlightening. Yes, yes, James! I'm telling him, now shut up! I'm not sure if Remus knows that James placed the book in the vault. He may have thought it was lost over the years. If necessary, he can help you with much of what you'll find in it. Show it to him if you like. It may cause him some pain, but I think the happy memories will far outweigh any sorrow he may feel. Study the book carefully Harry. It may help you find the answers that you seek. Sirius, will you shut up about the pranks? There are more important things in that book! I'm sorry Harry; did I forget to tell you Sirius is with us? Yes, I did sneak that in on you, didn't I?*

Harry gaped at the parchment. "Sirius", he whispered, grief stricken.

The flowing feminine script was suddenly cut off, replaced by bold, blocky characters.

*Yes, Harry, I'm here. Listen to your mother now. Ouch! Lily, that was uncalled for. OUCH! Okay, okay, here! Take the quill back then! Cya Harry...*

Grinning, Harry could almost picture his mother hexing his godfather. A moment later, his mother's handwriting returned.

*Its Mum at the quill again, Harry. Sirius is rather put out with you for blaming yourself about what happened at the Ministry of Magic. It was not your fault... Yes Padfoot, I'm telling him, now be quiet! Merlin, those two together again is enough to drive me mental! As I was saying, Sirius' death was not your fault, and he's a little exasperated with you for thinking it was. So the blame stops here young man, do you understand me? Good!*

*Never doubt our love for you, Harry. Your father and I did nothing so well as when we brought you into this world. You are our joy and everything we could have wished for in a child. Know that your father, Sirius and I continue to watch over you, and that while we may not be able to respond, we do hear you when you speak to us. Be strong, keep your friends close and know that we love you.*

*Oh, and Harry dear, talk to your Ginny about the nightmares. She'll know how to help.*

*All our love,*

Mum, Dad, and the flea bitten Padfoot.

PS. Ginny, take care of Harry!

PPS. Moony, get over it! Harry is going to need your help, so stop blaming yourself. Look after the cub for us, please. SB.

As the words stopped, Harry stared at the parchment; afraid the words would disappear if he looked away. His eyes started to burn and he realized he hadn't even blinked. Clutching the letter tight, he closed his eyes. "They can hear me, they never really left me. Sirius was right."

Cautiously, he opened his eyes and looked again at the parchment. The words were still there! He read it over again, then once more.

What could Ginny do about the nightmares? That made no sense. And what about the postscript from Sirius? Did Remus blame himself for Sirius' death? That was just stupid! It wasn't Remus' fault!

"I was the one who let myself be lured to the Ministry! It was my fault, not Moony's," Harry muttered to himself.

He jerked, as he felt the parchment warm in his hands. Looking at the letter, the words "It's not your fault" glowed golden for a moment, before fading back to plain black ink.

Harry wasn't sure how long he sat there before he folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. Tomorrow was Sunday; he might even be able to get some extra sleep, if only the nightmares would let him. Emotionally drained Harry curled up on his bed; his precious letter carefully folded up and placed under his pillow.

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### **At Jack's House...**

Jack sat at his kitchen table, reaching into the case of chocolate frogs he pulled one out and popped the container open. With a lunge he snagged the frog before it could leap away, and started munching on it while he looked over the material he had picked up in Honeydukes. There were several pamphlets, which looked like government publications.

What To Do In The Case Of A Death Eater Attack.

The Emergency Floo Broadcasting System: How It Works.

Quick Evacuation Kits: What To Pack If You Have To Leave In A Hurry.

Common Household Charms Which Can Be Used To Stall Attacks Until Help Arrives.

Pushing them to the side, he pulled out the copy of the Prophet and scanned the headlines.

MUGGLES SLAUGHTERED IN COVINGTON

YOU-KNOW-WHO SIGHTINGS ON THE RISE

MINISTRY IGNORES CALLS TO INCREASE AUROR FORCE

Settling on the last article, he read:

## MINISTRY IGNORES CALLS TO INCREASE AUROR FORCE

By Rita Skeeter

*Despite public calls, the Minister of Magic is maintaining that the current force of Aurors is adequate to handle the threat of Death Eater attacks. Anonymous sources from within the Ministry have admitted that only one of the past five Death Eater attacks have been thwarted. And that attack didn't involve any members of the Auror force. The first attack, which involved Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, Ron and Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood took place just over a month ago and resulted in the capture of eleven Death Eaters. Since that first attack there have been four others resulting in fatalities of 3 wizards, 2 witches and 14 muggles.*

*Despite the upswing in Death Eater attacks, Ministry spokesmen maintain the Auror is more than enough to handle You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters. The Minister of Magic is so confident in fact he has decided not to cancel his planned vacation to the south of France.*

Jack put the paper and thought for a moment. *Harry Potter? Could it be?*

He looked down at the paper when the Chocolate Frog package caught his eye. Looking closely he saw there was a collector's card on the package. Turning the card over, he nearly dropped it when he spotted the smiling face of Harry Potter staring back at him.

*Oh kid, you've got yourself into a heap of trouble, more than what's going on in your home, he thought.*

For a long while Jack Parsons sat at his table, thinking carefully about what he just read. Slowly his face took a determined look and he came to a decision.

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**Remus...**

Harry jerked awake, his sleep still plagued by nightmares, he groggily looked around.

"BOY! GET DOWN HERE NOW!" roared Uncle Vernon.

Dressing quickly Harry hurried down the stairs. Vernon was standing at the front door glaring at him, and then glaring at a smiling Remus Lupin.

"Remus!" Harry cried and hugged his friend.

Laughing Remus clutched at Harry, and then said, "Hiya Cub, what do you say we take a walk for a bit and have a nice talk ok?"

"Sure! Let me just grab something I want to show you!" With that, Harry dashed back upstairs. He grabbed the book which he still hadn't looked at and then carefully picked up his letter from

Lily. After a moments debate he decided he'd follow mum's advice. With that he ran back downstairs.

It was only a short while later when Remus and Harry found themselves seated on a nearby park bench. They chatted for a while, talking mostly about non-important stuff, like would he be Seeker this year or not and how Ron and Hermione were doing, when Harry finally asked. "Remus? Can I ask you something? Promise me you won't get mad at me ok?"

"Harry you can ask me anything you want, I'm not going to get mad. I promise."

Harry stood up and started pacing, muttering, "Mum said I should do this, and there was a message for him in that letter."

Remus stared at Harry in confusion. "Harry settle down, and what's this about your mum?"

Harry stopped suddenly and gave Remus a piercing look. For a brief moment his eyes glowed with raw power. Remus was startled.

"Remus, can I trust you? I mean, even if it means withholding information from Dumbledore and the Order? Will you give me oath as a wizard, a Marauder and friend of both my parents and Sirius that you will not tell Dumbledore what I'm going to tell you?"

Remus rocked back in shock. A wizard's oath would have been magically binding, but Harry wasn't willing to just accept that. He wanted far more. He sat silent for a moment, and then sighed.

"Harry, I don't know what has gotten you all worked up, but if it will make you feel better I promise not to reveal anything to anyone, on my word as a wizard, a Marauder and my friendship with James, Lily and Sirius."

Sitting next to Remus, Harry explained about his trip to Diagon Alley and the mistake made by the Goblin, who brought him to the Family Vault, instead of his normal fault. Then he talked about the box he found there, explaining that it contained a book and a strangely enchanted letter. He told him how the letter seemed to write itself as he looked at it.

Leaning back on the bench, Remus murmured, "Lily was one of the best charmers around, even better than Professor Flitwick. If anyone could have enchanted a letter like that, it would have been her. I assume that's the letter you have there? And the book?"

"Yes. Would you like to read the letter? There's a message in it for you, as well."

Remus nodded shakily and accepted the letter from Harry. His hands trembled and his eyes welled up with unshed tears several times. By the time he was done with the letter Lupin's shoulders were shaking. Harry put an arm around him and the two friends wept together for what had been stolen from their lives.

Regaining his composure, Harry wiped the tears from his face, and then looked carefully at Remus. It was obvious that a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, only to be replaced by a cold anger. The revelation of what had been taken away from him, what both he and Harry



had lost, touched Remus deeply. As Harry watched, the anger turned to rage, and for a brief moment, Harry could see the homicidal gleam of the werewolf within Lupin's eyes, before he regained control of himself. The anger remained, but it was manageable now.

Remus eyed one shaking hand, then reached up and brushed the hair out of his face before clearing his throat. Turning to look at Harry, he asked, "So, where do we go from here?"

"I have an idea, and I need to talk to my squib friend Jack Parsons about it, but if I'm right, it may make this war a whole lot easier for our side. I'll let you in on my idea after I've worked out the details. Unfortunately, I can no longer put any faith or trust in Dumbledore, or the Order, Remus. If there are any people in the order that you think we can trust, I'll go along with your judgment. Mum said I could trust you and your instincts. Maybe Tonks? I know she fancies you, Remus."

Remus turned a bright red and choked out, "She what?"

Harry laughed, then said, "Come on Remus, anyone can see she's got her sights set on a certain, rather dashing, if tattered wolf. Even I can see that!"

Remus looked guilty, if somewhat pleased, and then decided it was time to change this topic. He was not about to discuss his relationships with a teenager! "Harry, what did your Mum mean about an abusive environment?"

Harry's mood suddenly changed. He stared down at the ground and muttered, "It's nothing. You know how they are. They hate magic; they always call me names and put me down, or insult my parents and friends."

Remus placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Harry look at me."

Harry had trouble meeting his eyes.

"Did they ever hit you?" Lupin asked softly.

Harry could see the concern in Remus's eyes. The shame he felt was enormous. There he was, the Bloody-Boy-Who-Lived, a powerful wizard, but he couldn't handle a muggle. Turning away he stared down at the ground, his eyes tearing up. "Sometimes," he whispered.

"Harry, I promise you this much, this is going to be the LAST BLOODY SUMMER you spend with the Dursleys," Remus growled angrily. "If Dumbledore has a problem with that I'll make him regret it! You believe me right?"

Wiping tears from his eyes, he smiled shyly and nodded his head.

"Now Harry, let's look at this book that Lily talked about."

Harry handed the little black book to Remus. There was no title, and all the pages were blank. Harry looked puzzled, sitting next to Remus. Remus handed the book back to Harry and got up to pace. "Let me think about this a moment, Harry."

Holding the book Harry noticed for the first time how comfortable it felt in his hands. Without really thinking about it he whispered, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good!" There was a funny tingling in his fingertips and words started to appear on the cover. "Remus?"

Remus stared in shock, could it be?

Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs  
Are Proud to Present  
The Marauders Manual

"Harry, what? I... Oh Merlin! I thought that book was lost when the house at Godric Hollow exploded! Wait a second. Harry! You needed a wand to do that!"

Harry looked up, puzzled, and then shrugged, "Are you sure? I don't always use my wand on the Marauders Map."

"Both the map and the book required wands, Harry. You did wandless magic! Even the most powerful wizards are barely capable of it. The enchantment on the map and the book are very strong and you seem to be able to activate the book with no problem at all. Do you feel tired? Drained?"

"No Remus, I feel fine, really. So, what's in the book? Pranks? That could be useful for next semester."

"Harry, it has a lot more than just pranks. The four of us, then eventually your mother, all experimented with a lot of different types of magic. You'll find notes in there on animagus training, wandless magic, stealth and confusion charms and, of course, prank charms, hexes and curses. We never could get very far with the wandless magic. James was the strongest of us in that aspect, but even he couldn't activate the book with it."

Lupin stopped for a moment, and then grinned. "Harry, I'm going to transfigure myself into your Professor for a moment; I want you to study the section on wandless magic and animagus training. The two are very closely tied together inasmuch as they don't require a wand at all. You don't have to worry about the ministry complaining about underage magic if you can do wandless magic. They can only detect the use of a wand. That's why accidental magic rarely causes any legal problems for people. Hmm, let me think about this for a moment."

As Remus paced, muttering to himself, Harry looked down at the book. *Well, this is summer work I don't mind receiving from a professor!* He glanced back up when the mutters stopped, to find his friend eyeing him with an amused smile.

"I think, Harry, that I'll come visit you every Sunday from now on. I want to see how well your doing and my showing up every week will help keep the Dursleys at bay. If you can do wandless magic, you'll be able to protect yourself, and the exercises needed for it are the same as Occulmency."

For the first time in over a month, Harry felt a seed of hope grow in his heart. His idea for the coming war, wandless magic and Animagus! He might even be a stag like his father!

## Chapter 2 Harry's Summer.

### Hogwarts...

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and according to some, the greatest wizard of the age, sat in his chair and stared reflectively out the window. The war wasn't going well for the current administration; attacks were occurring with increasing frequency, casualties were mounting. Even the order had taken a few losses, mostly injuries.

The school year hadn't ended well for him. Harry and he had had a fight in which many truths were said that he now wished, in retrospect, had remained secret. Harry now knew about his destiny, something that Albus had not really wanted to reveal just yet. But for a brief moment he had let his feelings for the boy overcome logic and divulged the prophecy to him.

But still, things weren't totally beyond repair. His isolation with the Dursley's would give Harry time to calm down and come to realize that his only hope was to turn to him for the training he needed. It was true Harry could have gone to Grimmauld Place, or even the Burrow, but by leaving him there, Harry would be able to see that only Dumbledore could help him.

Yes, this really was the right way to approach it. Harry would be begging for his help come September. And who knows, maybe he could even convince Harry to help him oust that idiot Fudge from office.

So lost in his contemplation Dumbledore never even noticed the disapproving looks he got from Fawkes, his Phoenix.

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### **#12 Grimmauld Place...**

Remus Lupin paced back and forth in his third floor room. Inwardly he was an angry man. Only someone close to him would notice the signs of that anger however. His visit to Harry had troubled him greatly, between the secrets revealed in Lily's letter, the abuse Harry had suffered through and the discovery of Harry's wandless magic, he really felt the need to tear into some meat, or to talk to someone.

He only stopped pacing when there was a soft knock on his door. The door opened and Nymphadora Tonks stuck her head in the opening. "Hey, are you alright Remus? You've been awful shirty since your visit with Harry." she said softly. Her hair shifted wildly in color. Remus knew that the metamorphagus normally maintained strict control over her abilities; it was only when she was upset they got out of control like this.

Remus sighed softly, and then thought about what Harry had told him about Tonks. Offering a small smile and, suddenly feeling like a teenager asking for a date, he looked at Tonks. "No, I'm not alright. Tonks, would you allow me the honor of taking you out for dinner? I'd like to talk to you about several things, not the least of all is you and I. And I don't want to talk about it here."

Tonks beamed a flawless smile at him and her hair settled down to a soft buttery blond. "I'd really like that Remus." *HAH! Maybe hunting this old wolf is about to pay off finally* she thought.

## **The Burrow...**

Ginny Weasley lay on her bed trying to read her textbook. Sighing she closed the book and sat up. Something was wrong and she couldn't put her finger on it. For some reason she felt this summer was not going well for Harry.

"Harry," she sighed.

When she first met him, she'd instantly developed a crush on him. It was silly, it was stupid, and it was what kids did. Over the years, since that first meeting, she began to understand that he wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived; he was just Harry. He was loyal to a fault. Brave beyond belief. A very strong wizard, but beyond all that she could sense that, deep down, he was as terrified as a toddler in a thunderstorm. She could sense a pain in him, a terrible crushing pain that he constantly worked to keep hidden and in check. She knew he had grown up with people that didn't care about him. She shuddered thinking what that must be like for a small child, denied the comfort of loving parents. *And now he's stuck there all summer*, she thought.

Arthur Weasley had informed them last night that Professor Dumbledore wanted Harry to stay with the Dursley's all summer.

Ginny lay back down and opened her book again. The words never came into focus as she realized that no matter how hard she tried to deny it, she missed Harry. The crush she had tried to shake was developing into something far deeper and more profound.

Molly Weasley went about her business in the kitchen, getting ready to prepare dinner for her family. Recollection of last night's conversation at the dinner table filled her with both a bit of joy and a bit of foreboding. Arthur had told the family about Dumbledore's decision for Harry and she was disturbed by it. Ginny had been the most upset. Molly smiled a little thinking that perhaps her daughter's crush on Harry was becoming something more. That would be nice; Harry's a very nice boy, always polite, ever hesitant to put himself forward in the presence of others. Molly thought Ginny and Harry would be perfect for each other. Molly loved Harry like one of her own. For some reason she couldn't understand, something in his eyes seemed to reach out to her, pleading for someone to care about him.

"Harry," she sighed.

Every year he'd go to those muggles, and every year he'd return looking more and more like his spirit had been crushed. Something wasn't right about that and she had so hoped that Albus would allow him to come to the Burrow this year. She remembered briefly what Ron had told her when he showed up in the Burrow the summer between their first and second years. "But mum, they were starving him! He had bars on his windows!" Ron had exclaimed. She shook her head. Surely even muggles wouldn't do that to a child, especially one as polite and sweet as Harry. Trying to shake that train of thought she went back to fixing dinner for her family, Arthur would be home soon.

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## **Privet Drive...**

The room was dark; a small mattress lay on the floor and upon it laid Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. The mattress was far too short for his thin frame, his legs dangled off the end. Harry tossed and turned as he slipped from one nightmare to another. Perspiration beaded his forehead and he made small whimpering sounds as he fitfully slept.

## **BONG!**

Harry bolted upright, unsure if he had really heard something, or merely dreamt it. Through his window he could see a waning moon. Staring dully at the moon, it suddenly flared to a searing bright light. When his vision cleared he found himself in the air, flying above the town of Hogsmeade, his black wings keeping him effortlessly aloft. Looking down he saw that many of the buildings were burning; a few had even collapsed upon themselves. Bodies littered the street; off in the distance he could hear someone laughing with glee. It was an evil sound, a cruel laughter with no sense of joy in it and it filled his heart with dread. He knew that laugh. He'd heard it before. "Tom" he thought to himself.

## **BONG!**

The light flared again and suddenly Harry was over what could only be Hogwarts. The Gryffindor Tower had collapsed. The castle was aflame and the courtyard was littered with bodies. Even from this height he could make out who they were. Professors McGonagall and Sprout were on the ground surrounded by a number of first and second year students. Ron! Ron lay covering Hermione, protecting her to the last. Ginny? GINNY! Her body lay near the grand entrance to the school, naked and bloody. Harry choked back a sob while that same evil laughter echoed in the distance.

## **BONG!**

Again the light flared; when it cleared he was back in his normal form, standing near a small thatched cottage. Nearby was a small pond. Strangely, he felt at peace. Noticing smoke rising from the chimney he walked over to the door and knocked.

The door opened and a merry voice from within called him in. "Come in my boy, I'm glad you finally decided to visit me."

The room was sparsely furnished, an armchair by the fire, some books on a shelf, a bed, a table and a few kitchen chairs. In one of the chairs sat an old man, a very old man from the look of him. The man reminded him of someone, but he couldn't put a name to the face. All he knew was it was a kindly face. Whoever this man was, he was a friend.

"Come in Harry, I've been expecting you for some time and no doubt you have loads of questions for me. Unfortunately, our time is very short, so I'll get right to the point. The visions you have experienced are not nightmares Harry. They are visions of the future. Unlike the past, the future can be altered. What you saw is what will be, should you fail in your task. You've been given tremendous power Harry, more so than any other wizard, except perhaps for myself. In time you'll come to learn to use all of that power, but Tom won't give you the time to learn it all. You have to learn to master what you can now and rely on your greatest strength. Your ability to love

Harry, your ability to make loyal friends and keep them, it's your greatest weapon, if you can harness it."

In the distance there was a pealing of a bell. Instead of the harsh bongs of before, this was a joyous sound. The room started to brighten slowly and the old man started to fade out.

"Wait! Who are you Sir? Will I ever see you again?" Harry cried.

The words came to him softly as if from a great distance, "Yes child, we'll meet again. Trust in yourself Harry and follow your destiny."

The light continued to flare until Harry could see no more. Blinking, Harry realized he still lay on his bed in his darkened bedroom, staring at the waning moon.

*A vision? How can that be? All of my visions cause the pain in my scar to flare up! Voldemort had been there, but I didn't feel any pain?* Shaking his head, he sat up on the edge of the bed and glared at the moon, as if it should supply the answers to his questions. Something had happened to him. He felt different. No pain this time, but there was something different within him. *But what was it? What just happened?* He sighed in frustration and recalled the images of the vision.

Tom's laughter and Hogsmeade burning, Ron and 'Mione dead? And Ginny? Ginny dead! He could NOT ALLOW THAT TO HAPPEN! No matter what the cost, he couldn't allow it. A grim determination filled Harry as he turned on the small lamp the Dursley's had provided for him and pulled out the Marauders Manual. Turning to the section on wandless magic, he began to study.

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### **The Marauders Ride Again...**

Over the next two weeks Harry attacked everything with a grim determination. He studied the Marauders Manual, quickly mastering wandless magic, then moving on to reading about animagus training. His ability with charms and charming objects amazed him. He seemed to only need to know what the object looked like in order to be able to cast a charm on it. He learned to conjure complex objects and even practiced shielding with wandless magic. At night, he'd study the book, during the day he'd work at Jack's, then spend several hours talking about modern muggle military organization. Jack gave him several books on the subject, claiming he didn't want them anymore anyway. The low point of every week was Vernon dictating his letters to the Order; the highpoint was Remus's visits.

It was on Remus's second visit that he really learned the extent of how much Harry had learned. It was the complaints from the watchers that had tipped Remus off.

"Harry? Have you been doing something to the Order's watchers around your house?"

Harry looked sheepish and asked, "Um... what do you mean Remus?"

"Well, let's see. The other day, Tonks was on guard duty and had a problem with birds. Moody kept getting dogs lifting their legs on his wooden leg and, every time Mundungus drank a drop of firewhisky on duty, he'd get uncontrollable diarrhea. Shackbolt is unable to light his cigarettes

on duty, no matter how hard he tries, and the other night, Bill Weasley came out of Arebella's floo blue from head to toe! That STILL hasn't worn off and it's been three days!"

Harry smiled softly and whispered, "Mischief managed."

Remus blinked and then started to laugh. It was a deep laugh, the kind that Harry hadn't seen him do in ages, since before Sirius.

Remus took a few minutes to settle down; wiping the tears from his eyes he tried to be serious. "Harry you have to stop. You keep this up and you'll tip people off to what's happening."

Harry nodded, still smiling, and then watched a bird circling above. Suddenly there was a soft plop coming from behind him. "Are you mad at me, Tonks?" he said with a smirk.

"Damnit Harry!" Remus jumped at the sound of Tonks's voice, and turned to glare at the area the voice was coming from. "You do know that you have to hand wash these invisibility cloaks, don't you," she muttered to Harry in annoyance. "How long have you known I was here?"

"Since the beginning of the month." Harry replied as Remus started to laugh. "I cast a charm on myself that makes your cloaks shimmer. I'm not always sure who's under it, but I knew you were there. By the way Tonks, you do realize you have a piece of bird shi..."

"Stop that right now Harry, you prat!" she hissed.

Remus doubled over, laughing. Harry chuckled and surprisingly Tonks giggled under her cloak.

"Excellent work, Harry," Remus choked out, trying to contain his laughter. "I think its time for the next generation of Marauders to be inducted into our society."

Harry thought about it for a moment. *Why not have a little fun? If I can't enjoy life, then Tom has already won the war.*

Harry looked nervously over his shoulder at where Tonks would have been standing then looked back to Remus.

"Its ok, Harry. We talked for quite awhile, back at the beginning of the month. She doesn't know everything, but she knows how badly Dumbledore has treated us both and she's not happy about it. She'll keep your secrets, especially since you are the one that kicked me in the arse about her and got me moving in the right direction."

"Really? EXCELLENT!" Harry exclaimed. "I'm happy for both of you! In that case, I already have my Marauder name picked out. But it's a secret till I've gotten the next phase of my training down pat. Maybe by next week I'll have a surprise for you in that regard." He glanced at Remus, and then sighed.

"Remus, I have a favor to ask you. Dumbledore won't let me send any letters except for my weekly ones to the order. If I gave you letters, would you see they get delivered for me?"

Tonks whispered “If he won’t, I will Harry. Just tell people to send their letters to me or Remus and I’ll see you get them. This way you won’t have to wait a week to send them.”

“Thanks, Tonks.”

Harry stood up looking around. Remus looked at him noting he was finally putting on some muscle tone; he seemed to have filled out some as well. “Are the Dursley’s feeding you alright Harry? You look better than you did.”

Harry looked sheepish and said, “I’m eating fine now. I get a good breakfast at Jack’s. Lunch and dinner were a problem, until I figured out how to conjure food. But that’s ok now too.”

“The Dursley’s pretty much ignore me now. I leave before most of them are up, and return straight to my room. It’s not the best situation, but the silence of being ignored is better than a kick in the ribs.”

Remus chilled to hear those words, and that they were spoken in such a matter of fact manner, but had to agree with Harry. Still, it must be terribly lonely for him at night with no one to talk to. Remus had only recently come to understand his own isolation. Being with Tonks had banished that. But now that it was gone, he realized how special having someone around was. He also realized that being alone could be very damaging to a person.

Harry and Remus walked silently back to Privet Drive, with an invisible Tonks in tow.

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## Rebirth...

Later that same evening Harry finished the section of the Manual on animagus training for the third time. He knew how it worked, now to see if he could do it. Standing in the center of his room, he focused himself inward and tuned out his environment entirely. Harry could feel the magic building up in himself. He knew what he hoped to change into and he prayed he was right. This was either going to work or he’d be in for quite an uncomfortable night. Continuing the exercise, Harry focused all his will and magic on the form he had been reaching for all week. The manual’s exercises were quite specific, quest for your inner animal, and learn its aspect before attempting the morph. He had spent the last ten evenings doing just that. The meditating, directed dreaming, even his vision from the beginning of the month gave him clues. The problem was everything pointed to something that supposedly couldn’t be done.

In his mind he could see his form, but it was caged, locked behind a barrier. Harry pushed with his magic. Time and time again he beat against the barrier feeling it weaken with each blow. It was now or never. With one final push the barrier gave way. Harry felt everything alter around him.

Hedwig, the sole witness to this remarkable feat turned her head to stare at Harry. She flapped her wings and blinked owlishly. Harry turned to look at Hedwig, and then jumped up on the table to look at himself in the small mirror there.

*It worked! I’m a phoenix! And a handsome phoenix at that!* Harry admired himself in the mirror. Jet-black feathers with a white lightening stripe down his back.



*Oh, to fly! I want to fly, fast and far. I can go anywhere!* Stretching out his wings, he raised his head, ready to sing out his joy in a burst of Phoenix song. He froze. *Wait, this can't happen. Not yet!*

Tucking his wings back, he looked at himself in the mirror once more. *Concentrate Harry, he thought. This is the dangerous part. I must conquer the animal within to maintain my identity.*

Slowly but surely, reason beat back instinct. After a few minutes Harry realized he had mastered the animal. Taking stock of himself, he didn't feel tired, which in itself was surprising. The manual said he should feel tired. Flapping his wings he took flight from the tabletop and circled the room a few times before landing back in the center of the room. Changing back to his human form was even easier than he thought. One moment he was on the floor in Phoenix form, the next he was standing on his own two feet, checking his body parts again.

Harry transformed back and forth several times that night before crawling into bed. Each time the transformation was a little easier and little faster. Apparently once the barrier was broken, it stayed broken. Harry slipped into a comforting sleep that night, the first one in a long time, and dreamt of visiting a certain redhead near Ottery St. Catchpole.

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### Reaching Out...

The next night was hard on Harry. With a little more than a week to go to his birthday, he knew he had to get some letters out to his friends. Putting the Marauders Manual aside, he pulled out some parchment and began to write.

*Ron,*

*Hey Mate! How are you doing? I'm really sorry you got hurt in the ministry that night and I hope your feeling better now. I can't tell you how badly I felt to see my friends getting hurt following me into that bloody mess. What a wanker I was, eh? All I can say is I'm proud to consider you my best mate Ron, and I hope you'll forgive me for leading us all into that trap.*

*With that said, let me talk about what's going on here. Dumbledore has forbidden anyone to send me any letters. I'm trapped here 'til the end of the summer. If you want to send me a letter, send it to Professor Lupin at Grimmauld Place. He'll see that I get it. What ever you do, DO NOT let your mum and dad know you're sending me letters. Dumbledore would skin you alive if he found out, and then your mum would skin you some more. We have a lot to talk about, but I can't do it here. I'm still working out all the details, but if I can I'll arrange for all of us to meet soon. (Mind you, all of this is SUPER TOP SECRET!)*

*So get writing, tell me what's happening. I'm very alone this summer. I have a day job working for a muggle, who's a really nice bloke, but he is really an old guy and it's not the same thing.*

*Harry*

Setting the letter aside, he sighed. *One down, only five more to go,* he thought.

*Dear Hermione*

*I really hope your feeling better 'Mione. I can't tell you how bad I felt when I saw you hurt in the ministry. I feel like you're my sister and had we not been in the middle of a battle I think I would have broke down and cried seeing you like that.*

*You were right 'Mione and I was wrong. I'll admit it. If I hadn't rushed off to the ministry, Sirius would still be alive and you would have never gotten hurt. Next time I'll listen to you. I'm not quite ok, but I think I'm finally getting to the point of accepting the fact that he's gone.*

*By now you're probably at the Burrow. So tell me Sis, have you finally managed to nudge Ron off the fence yet? I know for a fact he fancies you, but is just too shy to make a move. Remember Griffyndors have courage (except for Ron when he's thinking about you).*

*With that said, let me talk about what's going on here. Dumbledore has forbidden anyone to send me any letters. I'm trapped here 'til the end of the summer. If you want to send me a letter, send it to Professor Lupin at Grimmauld Place. He'll see that I get it. What ever you do, DO NOT let Ron's mum and dad know you're sending me letters. Dumbledore would skin you alive if he found out, and then Ron's mum would skin you some more. We have a lot to talk about, but I can't do it here. I'm still working out all the details, but if I can I'll arrange for all of us to meet soon. (Mind you, all of this is SUPER TOP SECRET!)*

*I'll close this letter for now, but I will ask you if you mind me thinking of you as my sister? I have no brothers or sisters but I care for you as much as I would care for a real sister.*

*Your brother (Hopefully)  
Harry*

*Whew, this is a lot harder than it looks, Harry thought.*

*Pulling out more parchment Harry quickly wrote two more letters, one to Neville and another to Luna. Those were the easy ones. He saved the hardest letter to last.*

*Dear Ginny*

*This is my third attempt to put my thoughts to paper and get this letter written to you. For some reason writing to you is a lot harder than writing to anyone else. I'll start off by saying I am so sorry you were hurt that night in the ministry. I would rather die than see you get hurt again. I also want to apologize to you for ignoring you for the past few years. Yeah I'm stupid and a git, I'll admit that. It wasn't until last year that I even realized you were someone other than just Ron's little sister. It's not something I'm proud of, oh bloody hell; it's something that shames me deeply.*

*I have been given some advice from someone I can't name in this letter, who told me I should talk to you. Tell me Ginny, do you still have nightmares about Tom and your first year at Hogwarts? I hate to admit it, but barely a night goes by where I don't have at least one nightmare. How did you cope? How? I'm doing ok I guess, but rarely do I get more than four or five hours sleep in a night and to be honest its beginning to wear me down. Some days I feel like I'm numb to the world, other times I'm just so scared I want to curl up in a ball and die.*

*This is probably going to come out sounding silly and stupid, and I'm sure after I send this letter I'll wish I hadn't. But I'd really like to get to know you better Ginny. Damn why is it so hard to talk to you? I'm sitting here bursting with things I want to say and everything ends up sounding so stupid!*

*Dumbledore is being a git and refusing to allow anyone to send me any letters. Send a reply to this letter via Professor Lupin at Grimmauld Place and he'll see I get it. You can trust him. I've sent letters to Ron, 'Mione, Neville and Luna, but don't tell anyone but those four about any letters you get from me. I hate having to hide our letters like this, but it's really important that we do. Hopefully I'll be able to explain it all soon. I have a plan, which I'm still working on, but I may be able to meet with you next month. Until then, in Dumbledore's prison I must remain.*

*I'll understand if you decide not to reply to this letter. After leading us all into that trap I'm not sure I want to talk to me either!*

*Love  
Harry*

Harry sealed the letters. He'd put them outside in the morning and let Tonks know where they were as he walked by her on the way to Jack's place.

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### **Replies and Thoughts...**

Two days later Remus took Arthur up on his offer to come visit the Burrow for the day and take a breath of fresh air. Remus always enjoyed visiting the Burrow. It wasn't the posh elegance of some of the member's homes, but it clearly said family.

After sharing a cup of tea with Molly, he told her he wanted to check on Hermione and see how she was keeping up on her studies. She told him the kids were out by the new swimming hole they'd dug that summer.

Remus walked down to the swimming hole and sat down, leaning against a tree. Ron, Ginny and Hermione were playing around splashing in the water. Hermione spotted Remus watching them.

"Professor Lupin! Are you planning to join us," she asked with a smile. Hermione loved most of her teachers, Professor Snape being the sole exception to that rule and it was a constant source of irritation to Ron.

"No Hermione, but can you three come on out of the water for a bit? I have some news I'd like to share with you." The three of them piled out of the water grabbing towels and sat down next to Remus.

"Is something wrong," asked Ginny, looking suddenly worried by Remus's somber mood. "Is Harry ok?"

Thinking of Lily's letter, Remus smiled at Ginny, "No Ginny, there's nothing wrong. In fact I have something I need to give to each of you, but you need to promise me on your oath as

wizards and witches that you will not tell anyone, not even your parents about this.” After receiving a chorus of promises, he pulled a bundle out of his pocket.

“Harry asked me to give you these,” he said, handing out the three letters. “I’ve already given Neville and Luna their letters. According to Harry, he included instructions on how to reply to these letters. I’d suggest waiting until later to read them. You can owl me with your replies and I’ll see he gets them. Just remember, don’t tell your parents about this or you won’t be able to send any letters to Harry.”

“Is Harry ok, Professor?” asked Ginny again. She clutched her letter like it was the most important thing in the whole world. Remus smiled sadly at her.

“I think he’s getting over guilt he feels for Sirius’ death Ginny, but he definitely has his good and bad days. Sometimes he’s really hurting. He tries to hide it from me, but I see it anyway. I know he’s very lonely and misses all of you very much. He’s also scheming something. I don’t know what it is. I think he wants to talk to you guys about it before letting me in on it. He’s got a lot of things to worry about right now and he’s not in the best place to be. I think getting your letters back will help him a lot. If you can get me your letters before Sunday I’ll be able to give them to him then.”

All three of them listened to Remus, wide eyed. Ginny and Hermione’s eyes welled up with tears and they nodded in understanding.

The four walked back to the Burrow. After dinner, Remus thanked Molly for the excellent meal, and returned to Grimmauld Place. Ginny said she wanted to work on her summer homework. Hermione followed her, talking about having a book to read. As Ron went upstairs to polish and tune his broom, Molly was left to marvel at what industrious children she had this summer.

Hermione and Ginny entered the room they shared and both pulled out their letters. It wasn’t long before both of them were sobbing softly in the room. Looking at each other with watery, sad smiles, they both set about writing their replies.

Ron being Ron, his reply was fairly short and easy to write. After all, the Chudley Canons were still on their losing streak and, to Ron at least, that meant there was no justice in the world. Later that evening, Pigwidgeon was off with his burden to Remus.

Hermione hadn’t been asleep long when the sound of Ginny crying awakened her. Hermione climbed out of her nest of blankets and sat on Ginny’s bed. “Ginny? What’s wrong?” She asked softly.

“It’s Harry, ‘Mione. I think he was trying to say he liked me, but at the same time he told me about how bad he’s hurting.” Ginny explained about some parts of the letter Harry had sent her, causing Hermione to frown.

“I never thought I’d say this, but I think Professor Dumbledore has made a big mistake with Harry. I know Harry’s angry with him and frankly so am I!” Ginny tried unsuccessfully to choke back another sob. Hermione embraced her and whispered in her ear “Hush, Ginny. If he likes you and is reaching out to you, then it means he’s willing to accept help from you. So cheer up. Harry might be hurting, but I suspect you’re the one that’s going to make him happy again.”

Ginny searched the older girl's eyes carefully. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes Ginny, I think that's exactly what's going on. The boy that fancies you might not be one hundred percent whole at the moment, but I think you're going to fix that."

The two girls embraced again, then Hermione returned to her own bed.

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### **Vernon's Warpath and Owls...**

On the last Saturday of the month, and barely 3 days to Harry's birthday, Harry returned to the Dursley's after spending a grueling day painting and moving furniture. Harry still didn't perform magic, except under special circumstances, so he was bone tired when he got home. Despite feeling so drained he did manage to check Tonk's letter drop and was eager to read the letters from his friends.

"I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU I DIDN'T WANT ANYMORE OF YOUR FREAKISH WAYS IN HERE BOY!" Vernon roared as Harry closed the front door.

Harry was confused and started to stammer. "Wha-what? But I haven't been here to do anything!"

"GET THE LETTER FROM THAT DAMN OWL BOY AND THEN GET THAT RUDDY BIRD OUT OF HERE!"

Harry retrieved the letter from the unknown owl and watched it fly out of the house. He turned towards the stairs when he was kicked from behind and went sprawling to the floor. While Harry lay on the floor, shocked, Vernon reared back and planted a solid kick to the right side of Harry's chest. Harry scrambled to his feet wincing at the pain and ran up to his room.

"I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOUR FREAKISH FACE AGAIN TONIGHT BOY!" Vernon bellowed at his retreating back.

Breathing heavily and wincing in pain from his bruised ribs, Harry ripped open the letter he had paid for so dearly, hoping the information it contained was worth it.

*Mr. Harry Potter*

*Pursuant to Wizarding Regulation 157-86b, here are the results of your owls. Please note these represent total scores summing both the written and practical exams (where applicable).*

#### *ClassScore*

*Potions O*

*Charms O*

*Transfiguration O*

*Divination A*

*History of Magic D*

*Care of Magical Creatures O*

*Defense Against the Dark Arts O+*  
*Astronomy E*

*Total Owls 7.*

*Congratulations Mr. Potter. You are one of only 10 students in the last 200 years to receive an Owl with Distinction in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Please inform the Deputy Headmistress, Professor McGonagall, which classes you intend to attend next year before August 10th.*

*On another note, I have been tasked with informing you that your lifetime ban on Quidditch imposed by Delores Umbridge has been revoked. She had neither the authority to enact such a penalty or cause to. On behalf of the Ministry of Magic, please accept our apologies in this regard.*

*Sincerely,  
Mathilda Hopkiss  
Department of Examinations  
Ministry of Magic*

Seven Owls! Including one with distinction! He couldn't believe it! And an O in potions? Whoa! He quickly scrawled off a letter to Professor McGonagall for Remus to deliver.

Next he turned to the letters from his friends, precious letters, a lifeline to the outside world.

Ron's letter was as expected. He's ok now, no adverse effects from the brain attack and he's bummed out because the Chudley Canons continue their record breaking losing streak. No, some things in Ron's life never change.

Harry read both Neville and Luna's letters with relief. They were both pleased that he'd think enough of them to call them his friend and they were proud of the praise he heaped on their part of the fight so many weeks ago. Both hinted that they fancied the other, but hadn't come to the point of actually talking to each other about it yet.

Hermione's letter was a bit harder to handle. He could see the joy in finding someone willing to call her sister, and she was extraordinarily pleased about that. On the other hand, she went into this long tirade about dealing with his grief and finding someone to talk to. *Oh yeah, like Dumbledore is going to allow that*, he thought.

Ginny's letter scared him. He spent most of his letter babbling to her and he wasn't sure he wanted to read it. Would she reject him out of hand? Would she forgive him? His hand darted out to that letter and pulled back a half dozen times before he calmed himself enough to open it.

*Dear Harry,*

*I was so happy to read your letter and would love to get the chance for you to know me better. I don't think you were ignoring me for the past few years, I just think you needed time to recognize that I was there Harry. I've been there for you ever since you rescued me from Tom's chamber in my first year.*

*Your letter touched my heart. I know what you mean about the nightmares and I can only tell you that you need to talk about them with someone you can trust. If you like, I'd be happy to talk to you about them when we next see each other. Now you'll have to excuse me but... HARRY JAMES POTTER, WHAT THE BLOODY HELL DO YOU MEAN TALKING ABOUT WANTING TO CURL UP AND DIE? DON'T YOU REALIZE HOW MANY PEOPLE LOVE YOU AND WOULD BE HURT BY THAT? SO MANY PEOPLE CARE ABOUT YOU HARRY, TO LOSE YOU WOULD MAKE THE WORLD SO MUCH MORE SAD. RON AND HERMIONE WOULD BE CRUSHED; MUM AND DAD WOULD BE CRUSHED! I DON'T THINK I'D BE ABLE TO LIVE WITHOUT YOU HARRY, SO STOP TALKING THAT WAY. YOU'RE BEING AN ARSE!*

Harry winced over that, and then went back to reading.

*Now that I've gotten that out of the way Harry, yes I do think we need to talk, the sooner the better. I'm not sure I understand why Professor Dumbledore is acting the way he is, but right now I'm planning on slipping my improved bat bogey hex on him when I get the chance. Ron, Hermione and I are so angry at what he's done to you. Is there anyway we can see you sooner?*

*Love*

*Ginny*

The thought of Dumbledore getting hexed by Ginny was enough to make him laugh. *It would serve him right*, he thought. More importantly however, images of how Ginny looked when she was angry, how cute she was, flashed through his head.

Harry knew it was getting late, but he wanted to get a fast note to Ginny ready for tomorrow. He wrote a quick note asking her if there was any place near The Burrow where she could meet him privately, then apologized for such a short note.

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### **Sunday with Remus and Tonks...**

The next morning Harry met up with Remus and Tonks in the park. Tonks was off duty today. After handing Remus the letters, he needed to make a special request of the two of them.

“Remus, I want to show you both something, in private, but the only place I can think of that's private enough for this is my friend's house. You know, the American squib? Would that be ok with you and Tonks?”

Remus looked at Tonks for a moment, then she nodded in agreement. After a short walk to 10 Privet Drive, they entered the home.

“Jack! Jack, are you around,” yelled Harry.

“Harry? Waddya doing here today? Its your day off,” Jack said as he limped into the living room and stopped, eyeing the two strangers warily.

“Jack, I’d like you to meet Remus Lupin and his girlfriend Nymphadora Tonks, or Tonks for short. Call her by her first name and she’ll carve her name on your stomach just for the fun of it. Remus used to be one of my professors at school and he’s practically the only family I have left. He knew my mum and dad. Tonks is what we call an Auror, it’s the wizarding world equivalent of a policeman, well, sort of anyway.”

“Remus, Tonks, I’ve been working for Jack all summer, he’s ex-military and I’ve learned a lot from him about the muggle arts of war. I won’t say I know it all, but I know a lot more than I used to know. He’s given me more than a few ideas I want to try out with the DA this year.”

After the three of them exchanged handshakes, Jack invited them to sit down in the living room. Harry looked at the three of them with a sly smile.

Jack wondered what the heck was going on, and was the first one to bite. “Harry, would you like to tell us what’s going on, or are you going to stand there with a shit eating grin all day? You look like a tomcat that just got laid!” Remus and Tonks cracked up at this and Harry tried to scowl at Jack for stealing his thunder, then sighed and smiled again.

“Ok Jack, its like this. Remus used to belong to a select group of friends in my school that included my Dad, Mum and Godfather. Now, I’m going to show him why its time for me to join that group also. We needed a place that was private enough and I trust you Jack. That’s why we came here.”

Remus, leaning forward, looked up sharply. “You’ve mastered your animagus form Harry?” Tonks took in a sharp breath.

“Yes Remus, let me introduce you to WINGS!”

Harry paused for a second to make sure all were watching and then he transformed to his phoenix form. Remus and Tonks both paled but Jack watched on with interest as Harry glided around the room. Then with a calming cry he flame traveled from the living room to the kitchen and back. Turning back to his normal form, Harry crossed his arms and stood there waiting for a reaction. Remus’s mouth was wide open; Tonks gripped his hand tightly, shaking her head. Jack looked up at Harry not quite understanding what he had just witnessed, and exclaimed. “That was fantastic Harry!”

“Umm Remus? Tonks?” asked Harry.

Remus visibly shook off the shock and looked at Harry. “Do you know what you have just done Harry? No wizard has been able to transform into a magical creature since the age of Merlin! And even then, we have only hints of people being able to do it! If I didn’t see it with my own eyes I wouldn’t have believed it!”

Remus and Tonks both jumped off the couch and hugged Harry. Remus said, “Wings indeed, right now Prongs is poking Lily and saying that’s my boy! And Padfoot is probably claiming it came from his side of the family!”



Harry was grinning madly. "I've tested most of the abilities except for the healing tears. I can flame travel, lift very heavy objects, I have no problems flying around or landing. Pretty cool right?"

Jack looked slightly puzzled and asked about the underage restriction Harry had told him about. Remus explained that only applied to wandless magic. What Harry had done was all internally focused, and wandless to boot, hence undetectable.

Jack invited the three of them to lunch. Sitting at the table he regaled them with tales from his career and traded stories with Tonks. They spent a pleasant afternoon visiting with Jack and before long it was time for everyone to return home. Harry returned to the Dursley's. Remus and Tonks apparated back just outside of 12 Grimmauld Place.

Upon entering the manor, Remus suddenly scrunched up his face like he had just bit into something distasteful before darting up the stairs to his room. Tonks followed, puzzled. Hurrying into his room he immediately started to strip out of his clothing.

Tonks closed the door, leaned back against it and watched curiously while Remus tore at his clothes until he was down to just his underwear. His normally plain white boxers had transformed into the most embarrassingly skimpy g-string, tastefully done in the British Union Jack. Tonks collapsed on the floor in hysterics while Remus glared at her.

Seeing his expression, she choked back her laughter, then blinked. Standing quickly, she started peeling off her clothing just as quickly as Remus had. Grinning, Remus watched as, apparently, her underwear had just gone through the same transformation. In the shocked silence, Tonks stood there, in a skimpy bikini bra and g-string, her shoes transformed into eight-inch stiletto heels.

Tonks glanced up from her shocking attire to Remus's grinning face as the faint strains of Rule Britannia could be heard in the room. Remus doubled over with laughter, Tonks started to giggle. She shoved Remus, thinking to knock him over. Before he hit the floor, he wrapped his arms around her waist and carried her to the floor with him before they both burst out in hysterical laughter.

Back on Privet Drive Harry Potter looked upwards with a faint smile, his eyes glazed over and murmured, "Mischief managed".

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### **Another Birthday Alone...**

Harry's birthday was spent mostly alone. He was supposed to go to Jack's, but when he arrived, he found a note saying that Jack had to go out of town for three days. Harry trudged back to the Dursley's, depressed by the fact that he'd have to spend the day with people who hated him. The sole highpoint was finding a note at Tonks' letter drop from Ginny, detailing a place and time he could meet with her tomorrow.

Harry spent most of the day meditating and enhancing his mental shields. The work needed to learn both wandless magic and becoming an animagus was a great help in perfecting his occlumency. Harry now had rock solid shields that, for the most part, prevented Voldemort from picking through his thoughts. Unfortunately, the scar still bothered him. Some nights, he'd bolt

from the bed in pain, screaming. The only thing that prevented Vernon from pounding his head in was the silencing charm he had cast on the room. His only consolation was, the next time Snape tried to break into his mind, he was in for a rude surprise.

Harry crawled into bed that night, missing his friends and angry with Dumbledore for ruining his life. All in all, it had been one of the worst birthdays of his life.

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### **First Meeting...**

Harry woke early again, the nightmares still plaguing his sleep. Ginny's note said that Ron and Hermione would be busy most of the day and Molly would be at Grimmauld Place. She could meet him early, near a small, unused storage shed near the swimming hole. Harry spent his early hours reading a book that Remus had bought him called "Winning Duels Against Dark Wizards Using Dirty Tricks". It wasn't a bad book, but it put most of the emphasis on one-on-one dueling. As the time approached for Harry to leave, he started to get more and more nervous. Was he doing the right thing? Should he get others involved in this? Tom could use his feelings for his friends to hurt them all. Maybe he should forget about meeting with Ginny and just try to do it alone?

Suddenly he felt a sharp pain his forehead; his Mum's letter had shot out from under his pillow and smacked him in the forehead. The letter lay on the floor, one part glowed an angry red.

*Be very careful who you trust, Harry. Not everyone around you is looking out for your best interests, no matter what they may tell you. Ron and Hermione are loyal to you, as are Neville, Luna and your Ginny. Never doubt that. Remus thinks of you as a son, and would never betray you. Trust his instincts! Your friends will be your greatest source of strength, Harry. You will need them more in the coming years than ever before. Do not push them away. Lean on them, listen to their counsel and hold them close.*

Harry blinked and murmured, "Yes, Mum," then smiled softly. Returning the letter to its envelope he stuffed the letter carefully into a pocket. Harry then transformed into a phoenix and vanished in burst of flame.

Ginny walked out of the Burrow and wandered down to the old shed. She had told Ron and 'Mione that she was going out for a walk to think. Hermione figured she needed some time to sort out her feelings for Harry and having her out of the way would be a good time for her and Ron to try once again to talk to each other.

Ginny wondered how Harry expected to get here. He didn't have his broom; that was still locked up Umbridge's old office at Hogwarts. He was too young to apparate. The only thing that made any sense was, he was either taking some sort of muggle transportation, or Remus had somehow made an illegal portkey for him. With the shed between her and the Burrow she couldn't see the house. She looked around curiously wondering which way he'd appear from.

It was quiet behind the shed. The forest was barely 20 feet away and here and there she could hear the occasional bird. Suddenly there was a flash of light and fire. Startled, she stepped back, the fire vanished and in its place was the most wondrous black phoenix. The bird glided around her a few times singing a joyous song of welcome, then alighted on her shoulder. Ginny knew

about phoenixes. Hagrid had covered them last year before being chased off by Umbridge. Phoenixes were creatures of the light, very rare and hard to befriend. To have one land on her shoulder was a high honor. She reached up and caressed the soft downy feathers. The phoenix leaned into her caress, then turned its head to look at her, winked once and took off again. She noted the white lightening bolt coloring on its back and began to wonder. It only flew a short distance before turning around and in mid-flight transformed into Harry Potter!

Ginny gasped. "Harry?"

With a lunge, she threw herself on him, wrapping her arms around him. Harry buried his head into her shoulder and breathed deeply of the soft, sweet fragrance that was distinctly Ginny. Merlin she smelled good! They stayed that way as Ginny started fire questions at him.

"A phoenix? Harry! How did you do it? Are you registered? No, of course not. That damn Fudge would be up in arms over this. How did you do it? How? Harry?" She pulled back in his arms and looked at him closely. *He looks like he hasn't any had much sleep in weeks*, she thought. *Those nightmares must be really bad. He seems to be well fed and if I'm not mistaken he's actually got muscles now!*

"I think maybe the animagus part can wait, Harry. Come sit with me by the shed."

She took his hand, led him over to the shed and sat down. They still held hands, and all she could think was, *I'M HOLDING HARRY'S HAND! I'M HOLDING HARRY'S HAND!*

Harry looked anywhere but in her eyes. He knew if he looked into her soft brown eyes he'd be lost.

"Oh Harry," she said gently, reaching up with her other hand to touch his cheek. "Tell me about the nightmares please. I want to know."

Harry started off slowly, his voice almost inaudible. He started talking about his nightmares. As if a floodgate were opening, he told her about how many times he'd watched her and the others walk through the veil in the death chamber, or killed at the hands of Death Eaters, or by Tom. He told her about the nightmares where all of his friends reject him because he's a danger to their lives and the numerous nightmares where he stumbled onto her body too late to do anything. All the while, tears were flowing freely down his cheeks.

He told her about the nights when he woke up screaming, and the nights when his scar burned painfully. He was rocking back and forth now, trying to stop the pain and control his fears. He couldn't look her in the eye. He had revealed his weakness, laid bare his soul, explained how unworthy he was of their friendship. How they'd be in danger as his friend. Slowly he wound down and they sat in silence. Harry was afraid to look at her.

Ginny said softly "Harry, please look at me."

He shook his head. She got up on her knees in front of him and gently pulled his face up to look him in the eye. Somehow she knew that, while he might be the mightiest wizard in the world, right now he was laid naked before her, all his fears and nightmares exposed in the bright light of day. She shivered slightly; she could get lost staring into those glorious green eyes, but not right

now. Right now, she could see his pain and fears echoed in his eyes. He was like a thin sheet of ice ready to shatter and melt away.

“Oh Harry... No one is going to leave you, or reject you. We all love you,” she whispered and kissed his forehead. Harry crumpled against her, crying. She wrapped her arms around him and looked skyward, her own eyes moist with tears and cursed the fates that had turned this gentle young man into such a tortured soul. For a long time they stayed like that, locked in a gentle embrace while Harry, bit by bit, pulled himself back from the edge of the abyss, with the help of a loving soul. Slowly, he pulled away from her and gave her a weak smile, his eyes looking less shadowed, the lost look draining away.

“Merlin, it’s good to see you again Gin,” he said.

Ginny blinked and wondered. Gin? Normally any person who called her that would be on the receiving end of a bat bogey hex, but it didn’t sound all that bad from Harry. It sounded very intimate and actually sent shivers down her back.

With the spark returning to Harry, she was hard pressed not to hide behind her own embarrassment. Harry leaned over and kissed her softly on her cheek, then whispered in her ear, “Thank you Gin. My mum was right about you.” Pulling back, she didn’t even notice that her tear stained sundress was now dry and clean.

Now that was startling. What could he mean by his mum? Harry didn’t even remember her except for some vague nightmares and when attacked by dementors.

“Harry, I thought your mum died when you were a baby?”

“She did, but she left me a letter. I would have found it a lot earlier but Professor Dumbledore prevented me from finding it.” Harry went on to explain the strange enchantment on the letter and how the words had appeared as if someone had been writing them as he read it. He looked at her shyly and asked if she would like to see it.

She nodded. This sounded like very powerful magic, and it took a master wizard or witch to be able to cast an enchantment that could reach beyond the mortal plane.

Harry pulled out his precious letter and hesitated. Suddenly the letter shook violently in his hands. “Ok, ok Mum! Oh Merlin,” he growled at the letter before look back up at the girl before him. “Its sort of embarrassing Ginny, Merlin this isn’t easy!” he said blushing.

Ginny took the letter wondering what could be so embarrassing to him and started to read. She paused at several points in the letter to peer at Harry, but he made a point of studying one of his torn trainers. He couldn’t look her in the eye. Finally she carefully folded the letter and placed it back in its envelope. It was sacred.

“Harry,” she asked shyly, “is what your mum said about me true?”

Harry nodded nervously; he wouldn’t look her in the eye again. Ginny thought to herself *BOYS! They are such idiots sometimes*, and then she grabbed Harry and kissed him soundly.

Harry froze for a moment like an animal caught in a bright light, then he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back. Harry felt like he was caught up in a whirlwind, his mind completely gone. There wasn't a single spot on her he didn't want to kiss. He slowly kissed down her cheek and then onto her neck, she tilted her head back to give him better access, all the while making soft noises, egging him on. He had started to work on her shoulder, even pulling the fabric of her dress back when he stopped and just hugged her for a moment before releasing her. Ginny rocked back on her heels, her face flushed and her heart pounding.

"Sweet Merlin!" Ginny gasped.

"WOW!" said Harry.

They both looked at each other, hearts racing, breathing heavily and then they both giggled and hugged each other again.

"Gin, are you hungry?"

"Yeah, actually I am. Would you like me to run home and bring us something?"

"No need," he said with a smile and then conjured a picnic basket, complete with cold butterbeers.

"Harry, that's the second time I've seen you do magic without a wand! What's going on here? You know the Ministry laws against underage magic! You could get expelled, or sent to Azkaban!"

"Gin, I'll explain it all to you, Ron and Hermione tomorrow. If you can arrange for Neville and Luna to be here, that would be even better. Just make sure you all meet me here the same time as you did today. Today, let's just enjoy ourselves, alright?"

She nodded and started to pull food and drinks from the basket. They sat close together, eating comfortably and talking about all sorts of unimportant stuff. Every so often their hands touched, causing them both to blush. When they were done eating, Harry banished the basket. They sat for a while, saying nothing, and then Harry sighed. Ginny was sure he was going to say something, but she thought he was working up the courage first.

Harry looked at her strangely; she thought she could now see a hunger in his eyes. She blushed and felt a fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach. She could feel and see the tension in him at this point and wondered what could have gotten him so tense again.

"Gin, would you like to be... er, I mean would you... do you think it would be possible...oh Merlin!" He put his head in his hands and softly said "Why is it so hard for me to ask you to be my girlfriend?"

Ginny pulled his head up by his chin and softly whispered in his ear "I'd love to be your girlfriend Harry." Then she blushed all the way to the roots of her hair. She looked at him shyly, torn between embarrassment and joy over what he had asked. Once again they kissed softly, the longer the kiss lasted the more passionate it became. Ginny was running her hands up under the back of his shirt. Harry seemed to revel in the softness of her lips; the feel of her soft breasts pressed against him drove him wild. Harry slowly gained control of himself and pulled back from

her, he hugged her again and whispered in her ear, "I saved you once from Tom, but today you saved me." That sent a thrill racing through Ginny.

After a long while of holding her, just enjoying the company, Harry pulled away and said with a broad smile, "It's getting late Gin. You should go back home and I'll see you tomorrow."

With a silly grin on his face he hugged her once again and whispered, "No matter what happens, wait until tomorrow morning to take your shower. And whatever you see tonight, blame it on Fred and George."

He then stepped back, transformed into Wings and sang a soft croon to her before flame traveling back to Privet Drive.

### **That Night in The Burrow...**

Molly Weasley had had a hard day doing things for the Order. She was glad to be home and finally able to relax. Molly stepped into the shower and, while washing her hair, went back through the events of the day. A few minutes later, as she shut the water off she started to prepare a mental list of things to do tomorrow. However, when she exited the shower, there was a flash of light and she felt slightly dizzy. Putting a hand against the wall to steady herself, she noticed her arm first. Gawking, she glanced down at the rest of her body and let out an unholy shriek. She was covered from head to toe in soft downy feathers! And her feet were now duck flippers!

Dashing to the bedroom she threw on a robe and shouted at the top of her lungs "WHERE ARE THOSE BOYS!"

Hermione, Ginny and Ron stuck their heads out of their bedrooms. Hermione looked horrified, Ron, dumb founded. Ginny had jammed her fist into her mouth and was trying desperately not to laugh.

Arthur came running from downstairs and Molly, waving her arms around, yelled again "I'm going to kill those two boys. I rue the day I ever gave birth to them! QUACK!" Horrified Molly clapped her hands over her mouth and ran back into the master bedroom, closely followed by Arthur.

Hermione looked at Ron and asked, "Do you think it's safe?"

Ron shrugged, replying, "Yeah, usually they only do one shot charms."

Hermione grabbed her robe and a towel and headed off to the shower. About ten minutes later another shriek was heard from the bathroom.

The door opened and Hermione stalked out, a walking talking cat woman, down to the wet fur, angrily whipping tail, twitching whiskers and pointy ears, which now lay flat on her head! As she passed Ron she hissed at him, "You say a word and I'll rip out your eyeballs!"

Ginny was on her bed, her pillow pulled tight over her face trying desperately to muffle her laughter. All she could think was, *OH Harry!*

Hermione glared at Ginny hiding on the bed, trying to hide her laughter and told her “Your brothers are so dead! And if I find out you had anything to do with his, so are you!” Her tail whipped wildly back and forth.

Back on Privet Drive Harry Potter looked upwards with a faint smile, his eyes glazed over and murmured “Mischief managed”.

Harry settled down for nightmare-less night for the first time in weeks.

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The next morning Ron, Ginny and Hermione were sitting behind the shed. Molly was once again off to Grimmauld Place. Ginny insisted that they come with her to meet Harry. Ron thought she had finally gone “Barking mad” as he put it. Hermione was still a little put out from last night. They hadn’t been there long when Wings appeared in a flash of flame. Circling the trio, he sang a song of greetings and then landed on Ginny’s shoulder, nudging her gently with his head. He playfully nipped her ear then took to wing again. Like yesterday he flew but a short distance away, playfully looping around in the air. He climbed high, singing a joyous song then dove for the ground in front of the three. Just when it seemed he’d crash into the ground he transformed back to his normal form.

Ginny jumped up and hugged Harry. He hugged her back and gave her a deep kiss on the lips while Ron and Hermione sat there, dumbstruck. Hermione was the first one to break their silence.

“HARRY JAMES POTTER! You...You... You’re an animagus!”

Harry nodded and grinned. With his arm still holding Ginny tight, he pulled Hermione up and gave her a one armed hug. “It’s so good to see you sis,” he said shyly. Hermione squealed and flung her arms around him, hugging him closely

“I’ve missed you brother mine!”

“Well Ron? Are you just going to sit there, looking like a great big git catching flies with your mouth, or are you going to stand up and say hi to your best mate?” Harry grinned.

Ron looked at Harry holding Ginny and growled, “Oi Potter get yer hands off my little sister!”

Ginny frowned and stepped away from Harry. Putting her hands on her hips, she stalked towards Ron and started shouting.

“RONALD BELIOUS WEASELY! DON’T YOU DARE INTERFERE! I’M OLD ENOUGH TO KNOW WHOM I WANT TO DATE AND NO ONE, NOT YOU, NOT EVEN MUM IS GOING TO SAY ANYTHING ABOUT IT. IF THAT ISN’T GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU, I’LL SHOW YOU MY NEW IMPROVED MEGA BAT BOGEY HEX!”

Ron winced at the threat of an improved bat bogey hex.

Harry touched Ginny on the arm and she stepped back, scowling at Ron darkly. “Look Ron, you know me. I’d never do anything to hurt Ginny. Your family is worth too much to me to risk it by hurting Ginny. But I care very deeply for her. Besides, at least with me you know that she’s in good hands. Imagine where she’d be if she were dating Dean?”

Ron thought about it for a moment and then nodded. “Ok, but if you hurt her, I’ll beat your sorry arse to death with your own broom!”

Harry nodded in agreement and grinned “Ok Ron, but I’ll make the same promise back to you in regard to ‘Mione. You hurt her, and I’ll use you to mop the great hall.”

“What? Hermione is my friend! We’re not that way!”

Hermione suddenly ducked her head, but not before Harry had seen the hurt in her eyes. Nudging Ginny, Harry winked at her, and then said, “Are you absolutely positive about that Ron?”

“Yes! So stop bugging me about it!”

“So you wouldn’t mind in the least if I walked over to ‘Mione and snogged her until her toes curled?” Harry took a step towards Hermione and winked at her. For Hermione’s part, she was totally speechless and at a loss what to do. Her feet seemed riveted to the ground.

“Why should I care if you snog Hermione?”

“Ok Ron, on the count of three...”

“One!” Harry took a step towards Hermione.

“Two!” He grabbed her with both arms and pulled her to him.

Ron sputtered and yelled, “Oi Potter, you leave her alone, you git!”

“THREE! I’m going to snog her now Ron, watch!”

Hermione stiffened in his arms as he bent her backwards. Before he could reach her lips, Ron grabbed his arm and jerked him way, then reached out and caught Hermione’s hand to steady her as she stumbled and almost fell.

Ron yelled “Ok Ok! I fancy Hermione!”

Harry sauntered away, saying, “He’s all yours now, sis.”

Hermione was blushing from her head to her toes. Shyly she reached out to take Ron’s other hand and mouthed a thank you to Harry.

“Ok, let’s get down to business here. I have a lot of ground to cover before I have to get back to the Dursley’s.”



He started with his mum's letter and let them read it. Both Ron and Hermione were amazed and angered by what they read in that letter. Harry then gave Ginny the Marauders Manual to start working all three on wandless magic and animagus training, he had left the manual in activated mode. He went into the prophecy and what it really meant. Hermione and Ginny cried at that point, Ginny clutching him and Hermione weeping on Ron's shoulder. Ron wrapped an arm around Hermione and gave Harry a small grin. Harry just looked at Ron and nodded back.

Several hours later, Harry was summing up all his plans. "So that's basically it. I want to reorganize the DA around the Muggle way of fighting wars. Each of us is going to have a specific task that we need accomplished. 'Mione, you're on research and intelligence. You have the list of spells I want to either find or develop. Get Luna and Ginny to help you with that, they're smart. Ron, you're tactics and disinformation. It's up to you to develop our plans, and to help train the teams. Gin, you're going to act as my go between with everyone. Anytime anyone needs something from another group, see Ginny. She'll also help in developing offensive spells. Having seen her bat bogey hex, I'm almost afraid to see what she'll think up. Neville, with his knowledge in herbology, will come in handy in healing."

Harry sat back down. He never even noticed he had been pacing. Ginny wormed her way into his arms and looked up at him fearfully. "Don't worry Gin, with you guys helping, we can't lose. Besides, as long as I have you, I have every reason in the world to live. Before yesterday, you could have killed me and I wouldn't have cared one whit. Now I have a reason to want to get this over with." She smiled up at Harry and he bent down and kissed her softly. Ron smirked at the two of them until Hermione grabbed Ron and kissed him deeply.

"Ginny, 'Mione, I expect you two to get a hold of Neville and Luna to explain what's going on. I'll come back here every other day at six pm for a couple hours to help you all train in wandless magic and animagus training. Ginny will hold onto to the Marauders Manual, borrow it to read if you want, but make sure you give it back to her each night. Oh Ron, I'm planning on dropping Quidditch this year. Officially it will be because I want to concentrate on my classes; unofficially it's because of our plans. I want to warn everyone, secrecy is critical. Not just to keep Voldemort from finding out, but also to keep our illustrious headmaster from interfering. Remus and Tonks are with us, so if anyone needs anything, let them know. I'll pay for any books or material that's needed."

Hermione asked a few questions, then checked her notes which she had started taking very early in the conversation. Ron looked over her notes as well.

Harry stood up, stretched, and then said, "I wish I could stay longer, but it's getting late. Walk with me for a bit, Gin?" Harry looked down at her, offering her his hand.

They walked away from Ron and Hermione towards the darkening woods. Once out of sight, they embraced, kissing deeply. Harry then kissed her on the cheek and whispered; "I'll see you in two days, sweet Gin".

Stepping back from her, he transformed into Wings, circled once, singing a comforting song and flame traveled back to Privet Drive. Ginny sighed, feeling an aching emptiness now that he had left. She walked back to the others.

Ron and Hermione were sitting quietly holding hands and talking. Ginny looked at the other two and her expression turned steely. Ron echoed her expression and Hermione looked determined. The three walked back to the Burrow.

The DA was going to war and Dumbledore could stuff it if he didn't like it.

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### **Vernon's Parting Farewell...**

The month of August breezed by. Harry continued to work for Jack and return to the Burrow every two days. On Jack's advice he had Remus pick up a number of books for Ron to study. He met with Remus and Tonks every Sunday. During one such meeting, he had discovered that Sirius had left him a considerable sum of money, and Grimmauld Place in his will. Harry didn't want anything to do with it until Remus said, if he didn't want it, the manor would go to Bellatrix Lestrange or Narcissa Malfoy. That was enough to shut Harry up; he'd be damned before he'd let them get a hold of anything from Sirius.

Ron, Luna, Neville, Ginny and Hermione continued practicing wandless magic. Surprisingly, Ginny and Luna seemed to pick it up fairly quickly. Ron and Neville weren't quite as adept with it and Hermione, much to her annoyance just couldn't seem to make the leap of faith needed. None of them were capable of doing it at levels that Harry could, but they were progressing even better than Harry had expected. None were ready yet for an animagus transformation.

Just two days before Harry was due to return to Hogwarts, he was coming out of his room when he bumped into Uncle Vernon.

"BOY!"

Vernon swung his fist catching Harry by surprise. Vernon connected with Harry's head and Harry's eyes rolled in his sockets. He dropped like a sack of potatoes. Vernon grabbed Harry by the hair and dragged him into his room. Petunia in the kitchen could hear the sounds coming from the upstairs bedroom; she smiled as she continued to prepare the family dinner. Harry woke up two days later, his sides felt like they were on fire. The clock calendar on his table told him he had about two hours to get dressed and get to Kings Cross.

Casting a numbing charm on himself, he staggered out to the bathroom and took a quick shower. One look in the mirror and he knew he'd have to cast a glamour or he'd frighten his friends. After performing the spell, he hobbled back into the bedroom, shrunk his trunk so it would fit in his pocket, opened Hedwig's cage and told her to go to Hogwarts. With the empty cage now in another pocket, Harry snuck from the house, hoping no one would notice him. Outside he lifted his wand to signal for the Knight Bus.

The trip to Kings Cross was painful, but brief. He seemed to be having problems catching his breath and to make matters worse he was now running a fever. Harry entered platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  with 20 minutes to spare. He looked around blearily; suddenly an angel appeared at his side. Ginny. He carefully hugged her, biting his cheek to keep from moaning from the pain. Ginny pulled back and looked at him curiously.

"Harry are you ok?"

“Yeah... just... tired.”

Harry mustered his strength. He had one more task before he could board the train. With Ginny dragging him forward, he walked over to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Catching all the air he could manage into his lungs he blurted out “Can I have permission to date Ginny, Mrs. and Mr. Weasley?”

Mrs. Weasley squealed in delight and enveloped Harry in a bone-crushing hug, “Of course you can love! Oh, I’m so happy for both of you!” Harry winced and moaned; the sounds muffled by her shoulder. In one single hug more than a dozen bone fragments from a shattered rib pierced Harry’s lung. It was a nightmare! Harry kept casting numbing charms and pain relieving spells on himself as Ginny dragged him onto the train.

Harry sat down in the compartment Ginny and he had entered and he tried sleeping. Neville and Luna arrived a few minutes later. Not long after, Hermione and Ron entered having completed their prefect duties. Ginny warned them that Harry was trying to catch a nap. The five friends talked quietly for a while. They didn’t understand what was up with Harry, but if he needed his sleep they’d let him sleep. They were about half way to Hogwarts when they had an expected visitor.

Suddenly a loud voice sneered from the doorway.

“Well if it isn’t Potty and his merry band of Weaselettes, cowards, nuts and mudbloods!”

“Sod off Malfoy,” yelled Ron.

Harry, barely conscious, ignored Malfoy.

Malfoy sneered, “What’s the matter Potty, you going to let a poor weasel fight your battles for you? I knew you were nothing but a filthy coward!”

Ginny whipped out her wand pointing within inches of Malfoy’s face. He went cross-eyed trying to focus on the tip of the wand. “One more word from you Malfoy and you’ll think my Bat Bogey hex was a mild holiday prank!”

Malfoy paled and backed away from the room and, motioning for Crabbe and Goyle to follow him, they left.

Ginny sat back down, and then turned to Harry expecting him to be waking up. He wasn’t moving. She pulled on Harry’s shoulder to turn him away from the window. It was at that point she noticed the blood dribbling down his chin. Harry’s glamour collapsed and vanished. As he pitched forward, Ron and Neville leapt forward to catch him before he could hit the floor. Gently they turned him over. His face was a mass of bruises; both lenses of his glasses were shattered. Harry opened one eye and tried to smile at Ginny then his eyes rolled upwards and darkness took him.

Ginny screamed, “HARRY!”

Hermione dashed from the room. Suddenly there was a sound of cloth swishing and an invisibility cloak dropped to the floor revealing Tonks. "Oh Merlin Harry, what happened to you?" She knelt by his side.

Neville was the big surprise. He pushed Ron out of the way and felt for Harry's pulse. His eyes widened and he whipped out his new wand. "Suspensor Vitalus," he said and the wand glowed a bright blue, the light extended to Harry, enveloping him and half way up Neville's arm. "He needs a healer Auror Tonks! I can hold the spell for a while, but without a healer... I just don't know."

Tonks nodded and took off for the driver's cabin. Hermione returned to the room with a first aid kit which Neville had Ron root through for any blood replenishing potions. There weren't any potions in the kit.

Tonks returned to the cabin a few minutes later. "We'll be arriving in Hogsmeade in 10 minutes." They all noticed the train speed seemed to suddenly jump tremendously.

Beads of perspiration started to form on Neville's face. Luna reached over and rubbed his back gently. "You all right, Nev?" she asked.

Neville nodded. "I'm ok for now, but this takes a lot out of you. The charm slows down his life processes and pulls energy from me to keep him going. Ron loosen his tie and open his shirt, it will help with his breathing."

Tonks' eyes widened as the two-day-old handprints became visible on Harry's neck. "That wasn't done by magic."

Ginny looked up at Tonks and spat "The Dursley's! Harry told me that they used to beat him when he was growing up. I just thought he meant the odd spanking we all get as we grow up."

Tonks looked at Ginny, her eyes narrowing, outwardly calm, except for her hair rapidly cycling through every possible, and quite a few impossible, colors.

"Hang on Harry, help's coming," she muttered.

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## Chapter 3    Arrival at Hogwarts.

### Hogwarts, Headmasters office...

Albus Dumbledore was sitting at his desk enjoying a cup of tea with Hestia Jones and Remus Lupin, having just finished discussing the evenings security arrangements for the arrival of the Express. Some four hundred students would be arriving in just over two hours, and parents around the country had insisted that the children be given an Auror escort from Hogsmeade to the school.

All the plans were in place, and in a little over one and a half hours the train station would have 20 Aurors, plus another 10 Order members watching over things.

Suddenly, a fire call came in from Poppy Pomfrey. “Headmaster, the Express has arrived early. They are showing the signal for a medical emergency. There’s no security at the platform!”

“Poppy, alert all of the teachers, have them assemble and portkey to the station immediately. Hestia, return to headquarters and bring everyone there to the station right now.”

Dumbledore pulled out a sheet of parchment and mumbled “Portus”, and then turned to Remus. “Come Remus, let us go help.”

*What has gone wrong now? Things were going so well!*

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### Hogsmeade Station...

At the train station the scene was one of chaos. Most students did not know why they had arrived early and were piling out of the train. Prefects were shouting for people to line up by year and frantically looking for the carriages to take them to the castle. There was no sign of Hagrid to collect the first years. Tonks, Ron, Neville, Luna, Hermione and Ginny refused to leave Harry’s side. Finally Tonks sent Ron out to look for a teacher, anyone. Neville’s hands trembled as he continued to maintain the difficult spell, but clearly his strength was waning.

Suddenly, teachers started arriving via portkey and order members apparated around the train station in such numbers, it sounded like popcorn popping. Ron, spotting Molly Weasley, ran to her. “Mum! It’s Harry. He’s hurt real bad.”

Molly turned white and hurried to the train, followed closely by Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey. Dumbledore turned his wand on himself, amplifying his voice.

“Prefects, escort your classmates to their houses, the carriages will be here shortly. Hagrid take the first years to the great hall, it looks like we’ll have the welcoming feast a little early.” Dumbledore turned to follow McGonagall, but the chaos at the station prevented it. None of the Hogwarts house-elves had arrived yet and the station was quickly piling up with trunks and creatures. He’d have to stay here and trust McGonagall and Poppy to handle the problem on the train for at least a few more minutes.

Madam Pomfrey entered the cabin where Harry lay, with a quick glance at Neville she nodded. "Smart thinking, Mr. Longbottom! Now, let's get him portkeyed back to the infirmary. Can you hold on a few more minutes Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville nodded wearily. Madam Pomfrey produced a portkey, which she laid on Harry's chest. Everyone grabbed at either the portkey or Harry; in an instant they were gone. Molly wrung her hands and rushed from the train. The students were milling about as most of the carriages were just now beginning to arrive. Spotting Remus and Tonks talking, Molly hurried over to Remus. Tonks nodded once to Molly and disappeared. She was after all, an Auror, and a crime had been committed.

"We've got to get up to the castle Remus, it's Harry!"

"I know, Tonks just told me. Let's grab one of these carriages and get up there now."

Up in the infirmary, they levitated Harry into one of the beds. Ginny refused to leave his side. Madam Pomfrey performed a scanning spell, and then turned to Neville. "Alright, Mr. Longbottom, you can cancel your spell."

Neville slumped back, exhausted. Ron and Luna caught him and laid him out on another bed.

Madam Pomfrey placed a fire call to Professor Snape. "Severus, I need four units of blood replenishment potions and a lung clearer potion as quick as you can! Oh, and bring a high fever reducer also!" Without waiting for a reply she turned back to Harry and started to repair his damaged ribs.

Madam Pomfrey looked at Hermione, Ron and Luna and told them to go to their houses. Snape arrived with the potions and she quickly administered them, and then sat back. "Well, that's all we can do for the moment. I think he's out of danger at least."

Madam Pomfrey went into her office and returned with a camera and a handful of forms. She looked at Professors Snape and McGonagall. "I know this isn't going to be tasteful, but we need to strip him down so I can document these injuries. I'll need your help and you'll have to sign as witnesses."

Both Snape and McGonagall looked startled. Snape coughed and McGonagall asked "Why Poppy? Why are you documenting this?"

"Minerva, these injuries weren't caused by magic! The boy's been beaten badly. He probably wouldn't have survived at all had it not been for the quick thinking of Mr. Longbottom over there." She pointed at the sleeping Neville. "We have to document this and report it to the Aurors, I don't know who did this, but they nearly killed him."

Ginny whispered, "It was his Uncle." She looked up at Madam Pomfrey who stared down at her in shock. "Harry told me that his Uncle used to beat him fairly often. Back in the summer of his second year, my brothers rescued him from them; he was locked in his room with bars on the windows. They were starving him. I didn't think anything about it! I thought he only meant a spanking like we all got growing up!" She choked back a sob. Snape's normal frowned deepened and Professor McGonagall looked positively furious.

The three adults traded glances and Professor McGonagall turned to Ginny, her look softened. “Miss Weasley lets give Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey a few minutes to do what they have to do. Why don’t we go visit Neville for a bit? Then you can come back to Harry.”

Ginny reluctantly put Harry’s hand down on the bed; she softly straightened out his hair a bit and got up to follow Professor McGonagall. Madam Pomfrey conjured some curtains to hide the bed and Harry from view.

Professor McGonagall and Ginny sat next to Neville’s bed for what seemed like a very long time as a light flashed behind the curtain. After about 15 minutes, Remus and Molly came rushing into the infirmary. Ginny bolted over to her Mum and grabbed her, sobbing uncontrollably. Professor McGonagall walked over to Remus and Molly. “He’s out of danger now. Madam Pomfrey is with him at the moment, along with Severus. She has to document his injuries before she can finish treating him.”

At this point Neville sat upright in his bed. “Wha...? HARRY! Is he ok?”

For the first time in his life Neville saw a sight he didn’t believe possible. To be frank, it was nearly enough to send Neville back into unconsciousness. Professor McGonagall smiled warmly at him. “Aye, that he is Mr. Longbottom. Oh, and 50 points to Griffyndor for your quick actions. Madam Pomfrey says you saved his life. Now, since your feeling better, why don’t you head back to your house and get settled in.”

Neville got up shakily and started to wobble to the door. Fifty points? He never earned that kind of points before! As he passed Molly and Ginny, Ginny grabbed his arm.

“Thank you Neville!”

Neville nodded and Ginny released him and wobbled his way out the door with a look of pure shock on his face.

Neville passed Dumbledore on his way out. Dumbledore was just arriving after having seen all the students safely to the school, the sound of the camera and the flash still coming from behind the curtains. Finally the sounds stopped and the curtains were banished. Harry was dressed in infirmary pajamas and starting to look a lot better as Madam Pomfrey attended to the bruising. A tall dark man entered the infirmary silently. Madam Pomfrey looked up while Snape made duplicates of the forms and photos. “It was close, a lot closer than I’d like. He’ll wake up in an hour or two.” She looked at the dark man. “And you are?”

He stepped forward. And spoke with an American accent.

“Excuse me ma’am, I just arrived. I’m Auror William Hill, from the office of child protective services. I take it you have the documentation already for me? Director Bones flooded me personally after the incident was reported; she’s directed me to investigate this case. So here I am.”

Dumbledore winced at hearing that; this was the last thing he wanted. Official involvement was going to make this a mess.

Madam Pomfrey handed over the copies to Mr. Hill.

“Since you expect him to wake in two hours, I’ll return in three hours. I’ll be bringing a Magistrate and a Mind Healer along with me. Often in these cases a Mind Healer helps to get the victim to talk. It’s fortunate, tonight we have one of our best empaths on duty.”

Dumbledore spoke up. “Is all this really necessary?” Nearly everyone in the room scowled at him. It was important that Harry get better of course, but having the Ministry involved would only complicate matters.

Auror Hill looked at him sharply. “Headmaster, you of all people should know that protecting our children is critical! Harry arrived at the school nearly dead. The law is quite specific on this point.”

Dumbledore sighed and nodded in acceptance.

Remus leaned over and whispered something in Molly’s ear. “Ginny dear, why don’t you go sit with Harry while I go have a talk with Remus.”

Ginny nodded and walked back over to Harry, taking his hand again. Dumbledore looked surprised and not quite pleased at what he was seeing. Molly and Remus left the infirmary.

Dumbledore turned to leave. There was the Welcoming feast to attend to.

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### **Molly and Remus...**

Molly and Remus found themselves an empty classroom to talk in.

“Remus, what is it that’s so important?”

Remus explained how James and Lily had wanted Harry to go to either Sirius or himself after their death, about how Dumbledore had violated their wishes and placed Harry with the Dursley’s. He also told her what little he knew about Harry’s life, prior to Hogwarts. Molly’s expression grew darker. Finally winding down, Remus looked at Molly.

“I have to ask a favor of you and Arthur, Molly. I can’t legally adopt Harry. The anti-werewolf laws prevent that. I can’t even be his guardian. Would you and Arthur be willing to take him in? He needs a home and parents so badly. He’s had a bad life and a great task ahead of him. He needs the stability and love that only parents like you and Arthur can provide. Harry and I inherited fortunes, I’ll gladly pay all of the legal expenses, and I’d burn all those galleons to see him happy. All I ask is can I be his uncle?” The pleading expression in his eyes was plain.

Molly smiled at Remus; clearly the man loved Harry like a son, but was in a tight spot due to the anti-werewolf laws. Molly embraced him with a warm hug. “Welcome to the family, Uncle Remus!”

Remus smiled at her. “Thank you, for myself and for Harry.”



Molly and Remus left the classroom. Both had calls to place. Important calls.

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### Harry...

Molly and Ginny sat with Harry. A house elf had brought them both something to eat earlier. Professor Dumbledore had been up once to visit and left briefly after seeing Harry still unconscious. Ginny still held his hand and talked quietly with her Mum.

Slowly, Harry started stirring, and then he opened his eyes. He blinked and murmured "I really need to ask Madam Pomfrey to reserve a bed for me in here."

He looked around; his body ached from his head to his toes. Ginny? "Ginny? Is that you?" He fumbled around looking for his glasses, but couldn't find them.

"Where are my glasses? I can't see anything without them." He started to sit up, but two hands pressed him back down.

Ginny helped him get more comfortable. "Welcome back love. You scared us for a while there, but you're going to be fine." She smoothed the hair on his head, and then ran her hand along his cheek. Harry closed his eyes and leaned into her hand with a small smile.

Molly was amazed. She always knew that Ginny liked Harry, but had no idea it had progressed to his point. After all, Ginny hadn't seen or wrote to Harry over the summer and they didn't seem to be that close back at Kings Cross at the end of the last school term. She was pleased, but her mother's instincts clearly said something had happened between the two of them during the summer.

Harry then he heard Mrs. Weasley's voice. "Just relax, dear. Arthur will be here soon. He's taking care of a few things with Remus first, and then he'll bring you a new pair of glasses. Harry, in a little while, some people will be coming in to talk to you. Arthur, Remus and myself will be here with you to help you. I want you to know that everything is going to turn out alright."

Harry nodded silently, wondering what was happening. "Can Ginny stay also Mrs. Weasley?"

"Are you sure about that Harry? Some of the questions are bound to be very painful for you."

"I think it's important that she be here. I'm not sure why, but I think it's important that she hear the answers also."

"Very well Harry. She'll be right here with you, but in the meantime I'd like to talk to her for a moment."

Ginny followed her mother over to the entrance of the infirmary. Molly eyed her carefully.

"Ginny dear, Harry wants you here and I'm not sure that's a really good idea, but I want you to try very hard to control your emotions. The process Harry is going to be undergoing with the empath is easily disrupted if Harry gets upset because you're upset. I don't think any one of us is

going to like what we hear tonight, least of all Harry. Be strong for him. I promise it's going to be better."

Ginny nodded at her mother and they both returned to his bedside. Harry's vision was such that without his glasses he really had a difficult time telling people apart. But Ginny was shorter than her mother, so that made it easier for him. He watched the two red headed blurs sit down and he smiled.

"This is nice. I'm with my two favorite red heads. Well, the color red anyway. For all I know, you," he said, pointing at Molly "could be Professor Snape wearing a wig." Ginny giggled.

Madam Pomfrey came out of her office and walked over to Harry. She clucked over him for a few minutes.

"Well Mr. Potter, I see you managed to survive once again. I swear I should put a sign over this bed reading, 'Reserved for Harry Potter!'" Both Molly and Ginny laughed, and explained to Madam Pomfrey that Harry had said much the same thing when he awoke.

"I'll have dinner sent up after you're done with your visitors, Mr. Potter. Then I have this nice dreamless sleep potion for you to drink." With that Madam Pomfrey returned to her office.

The double doors to the infirmary swung open and a small crowd of people came in. Arthur Weasley handed Ginny a pair of glasses that she put on Harry. Suddenly everything came into focus. Harry looked around; there was Remus, Mr. & Mrs. Weasley, Ginny, Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, and four people he didn't know.

"Enchanted glassed Harry, they adapt to your own eyes. I didn't have time to go to a muggle eye glass store, which I'm sure would have been fascinating!" said Mr. Weasley

"Thank you Mr. Weasley. I don't feel comfortable without my glasses on."

Arthur moved over to stand next to Ginny, followed by both Molly and Remus. Ginny tightened her grip on Harry's hand. Remus seeing that broke into a wide grin.

"I think Lily would approve cub. Another red head."

Harry blushed.

One of the strangers spoke up.

"Harry, we met briefly earlier, but you weren't in any condition to meet people. I'm Auror William Hill, but you can call me Bill. I represent the Ministry of Magic, Department of Child Protective Services. We're going to ask you some questions, but I want to make it clear from the start, you are NOT in trouble. Take your time answering the questions. Relax; we'll all be here to help you. We'll try to make this as easy as possible for you."

Auror Hill then turned to the man next to him and pointed, "This is Magistrate Janicak. He's the one that will be asking you some questions. Mind Healer Sorenson," he continued, pointing to a short, mousy haired woman, "is here to help you answer the questions."

Magistrate Janicak conjured a table and chair and sat down. He pulled some parchment and an enchanted quill out of his case and said “Right, let’s get started then. This is a preliminary hearing into the incident at Hogsmeade station concerning Harry James Potter. It will be the intent of these proceedings to investigate and, if necessary, take steps to insure the safety of Mr. Potter. I’d like all those present to identify themselves for the record please. Please state your name and why you’re here.” On the table next to the Magistrate, the quill scribbled furiously, taking notes.

“Auror William Hill. Caseworker and friend of the court in regards to the current status of Harry James Potter.”

“Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts. It is my intent to take petition for Guardianship of Mr. Potter.”

Harry tensed and glared at that murmuring, “Over my dead body.” Arthur Weasley touched Harry on the shoulder and told him to relax.

“Remus Lupin, a close family friend of Harry’s parents.”

“Professor Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and the head of Mr. Potter’s house here at school.”

“Severus Snape, Potions Master for Hogwarts.”

“Barrister Parton, I represent Arthur and Molly Weasley and the rest of the Weasley family. I have already filed preliminary paperwork to the court with regards to beginning formal guardian rights for Harry James Potter.” He handed papers over to the Magistrate.

Dumbledore looked shocked at this, shooting an inquisitive look at Arthur and Molly.

Magistrate Janicak looked up saying, “I suppose all the red heads in here belong to the Weasley family?” Arthur, Molly and Ginny nodded. The magistrate looked at Ginny. “Miss, I’m not so sure this is something you should be partaking in.”

Harry spoke up. “I asked her to be here Sir. I know some of this won’t be pleasant, but it’s important to me that she is here.”

“Very well then, Healer Sorenson, if you would be so kind, we can begin.” The woman sat on the edge of Harry’s bed and smiled. “Just relax Harry and let me hold your hand Harry. This isn’t going to hurt you and I’ll do my best to keep you calm.” She took his hand.

Harry felt himself drifting. His eyes fluttered rapidly and it felt like he was somewhere in that place between being asleep and awake. From a great distance, he heard a voice saying, “Magistrate, his mind shields are too strong. I can keep him calm, but can’t reach his memories directly. We’ll have to ask questions and go with verbal replies. He should be nearly asleep now and the shields are rock steady. Astounding!”

Then another voice asked, “Harry, please tell us what happened to you.”

*“Uncle Vernon beat me a couple days before I was supposed to leave for Hogwarts. I accidentally bumped into him coming out of my room. He hit me in the head before I could defend myself then dragged me back into my room by my hair. I don’t remember much after that. I do remember Aunt Petunia came into the room to tell him dinner was ready, I think I might have passed out after that. When I woke up, it was nearly time to go to the train station.”*

“Did your Aunt Petunia do anything to stop your Uncle?”

*“No, never. Sometimes she’d even help him hit me.”*

“Did they hit you often Harry?”

*“All the time, before I got my first Hogwarts letter and Hagrid rescued me. Not so much after I started going to Hogwarts. Couple times a summer I guess. That’s why I never wanted to go back there, but Dumbledore insisted, even when Molly and Arthur Weasley said I was welcome in their home for the summer.”*

“Did they do anything else besides hitting you?”

*“Yes, they always called me names. Freak, strange, they always insulted me or my parents or the wizarding world. They also sometimes kept me from eating for days at a time. They made me sleep in the cupboard under the stairs until I was sent to Hogwarts. Then I was allowed to move my mattress into Dudley’s old toy room.”*

“Ok Harry, I want you to think back. What is the first memory you have of your Aunt and Uncle?”

*“I’m three. Dudley, my cousin is playing in the living room. I come out of the cupboard and pick up one of the toys. Dudley starts to cry. Aunt Petunia rushes into the living room, kicks me in the stomach and drags me back to the cupboard.”*

Ginny reached up to grab her father’s hand. Molly looked horrified, and then buried her head into Arthur’s shoulder. Remus’s face contorted he looked like he was about to break down and weep. Professor McGonagall looked like she was planning on visiting the Dursley’s herself, and deducting points would be the last thing she had on her mind.

Albus Dumbledore was surprised at what he was hearing, but was outwardly calm. He knew things hadn’t been easy for Harry, but never really suspected that things were that bad.

“How about another memory Harry? Tell us about your sixth birthday, Harry.”

*“It’s morning. Uncle Vernon is screaming because I haven’t finished cooking breakfast. I burn my hand on hot grease trying to get the slices out of the pan and start to cry. Uncle Vernon tries to kick me, but I dodge and he misses my body. He’s kicked my arm. My arm is bent funny and hurts so much. Aunt Petunia grabs me by that arm and throws me back into the cupboard. They don’t let me out until Monday morning. I’m in there three days. I’m so hungry it hurts, my arm hurts, hurts hurts hurts...”*

“Magistrate, you better wrap this up, he’s feeling real pain now and the backlash of continued questioning is going to be very hard to deal with.”

The Magistrate looked at Auror Hill. “Do you have enough information?” Hill nodded grimly. “Very well Healer Sorenson, bring him out of it.”

Harry jerked like someone had kicked him. That calm floating feeling was completely gone and, like a tidal wave, the horrors of those memories came crashing down on him. The use of the mind healer had brought all those deeply suppressed memories to the front. His face screwed up and he curled into a fetal position on the bed, sobbing uncontrollably. Molly took one look and swept him into her arms. Ginny frowned at Molly.

“Right now he needs his mum more dear,” Molly said, looking at her daughter gently. Ginny suddenly understood. There is a time for lovers to hold each other, and a time for a mother to hold her child. She grinned at Molly.

Madam Pomfrey appeared, a calming draught in her hand. It took both Madam Pomfrey and Molly several minutes to coax the draught into him.

The Magistrate had watched all this dispassionately. He had noted the adult reactions during and after the session with Harry. Filling out some paperwork, he handed it to Arthur’s barrister. “I’m granting temporary custody of Harry James Potter to Molly and Arthur Weasley. This order will become permanent unless a petition for a formal custody hearing occurs within the next 30 days. It is the opinion of this Magistrate, and I will personally testify to such, that the Weasley’s are obviously capable parents, and Harry will do well placed there. Auror Hill has, in my opinion, enough information to follow up with an arrest warrant for Petunia and Vernon Dursley. Their son Dudley, as a minor, will have his memory obliterated and be sent to live with his paternal aunt. I hereby declare these proceedings closed.”

Harry looked up at Molly and whispered “Does this mean Ginny is my sister now and I can’t date her?”

Molly smiled. “No love, you can still date her. Who knows, we might make a Weasley out of you yet. Now rest love, we’re here for you.”

Harry closed his eyes and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Madam Pomfrey put the dreamless sleep potion she had been holding away. Obviously, Harry wouldn’t need it tonight. *Some things*, she thought, *are even better than potions*.

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### **Griffyndor Common Room...**

Ron, Neville and Hermione waited up anxiously for Ginny to return from the infirmary. At this point, they had no idea how Harry was and no one saw fit to provide them with any updates. Ron and Neville tried to pass the time with some wizard’s chess and exploding snap, but, like Hermione reading her book, they had trouble concentrating on what they were doing. Eventually the three of them migrated to the large couch in front of the fire and just stared into it.

The door to the common room swung open. Ginny walked in and, seeing the three of them still up, gave them all a wan smile. She sat next to Hermione on the edge of the couch and closed her eyes briefly before speaking.

“Can you imagine growing up in a place where everyone hates you and treats you worse than any house-elf? Where you’re beaten regularly? How Harry could have gone through all that and still be so kind and gentle and giving is beyond me.”

Ron spoke up. “So, are you going to tell us what happened or not?”

Ginny sighed. “Ok, here’s the short story Ron. Mum and Dad have become Harry’s guardians. The Dursley’s are to be arrested and sent to Azkaban if, they are lucky. Harry will be living with us from now on. Harry’s fine now. Madam Pomfrey will probably let him out in time for tomorrow’s breakfast. In the meantime, I think I’ll go to bed. I learned tonight that there are some things even worse than Tom Riddle and I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Hermione looked worriedly at Ron, gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, and then followed Ginny up the girls’ staircase. Ron and Neville shrugged to each other and headed up to bed.

Hermione got ready for bed, but decided to check on Ginny first. Approaching Ginny’s bed, she could see a small light peeking from behind the curtains. Ginny sat on the bed, her knees pulled up close. Hermione climbed into the bed and cast an Impertable charm around the bed, so their talking wouldn’t wake anyone. The light of a small, ever-lasting candle lit the interior of the bed. Ginny looked at Hermione, tears streaming down her face.

“How can someone be so cruel to a child ‘Mione? Oh Merlin, the things they did to him.” she sniffled. “Did you know, on his sixth birthday, they broke his arm and then locked him in that cupboard for three days? I keep thinking about Tom Riddle. He was badly treated also. How could he turn out so bad and Harry so good?”

Hermione pulled Ginny into an embrace. “He’s good because his heart is in the right place Ginny. And he has you to see it stays there. I don’t know why some people do what they do. Harry could have easily turned out as bad or even worse than Tom, but he didn’t and he’s not going to.”

Ginny and Hermione talked long into the night.

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### **The Dursley's Residence, 4 Privet Drive...**

The door opened silently. It was late as the six-man extraction team moved in with a minimum of fuss. Within three minutes, the two elder Dursley’s were on the way to the Ministry of Magic, under arrest. Dudley was obliviated and sent to his Aunt Marge’s to live.

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### **12 Grimmauld Place...**

Tonks entered the bedroom, her nightshirt cut to just above mid thigh, a towel about her neck. She padded along the floor and slipped under the covers snuggling up to Remus. Remus lay in the bed with a dreamy smile on his face. Tonks propped her head up on one arm and looked at him.

“What are you on about? You normally only smile like that after... you know...” she blushed and stammered to a halt.

Remus turned his head and brushed a finger down her cheek. “Harry. Somehow, I just have this feeling that Lily, James and Sirius are smiling right now.”

Tonks smiled at Remus. She laid one arm across his chest and her head on his shoulder. They were both asleep in minutes.

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### **Slytherin House, Private Quarters...**

In his private quarters, Severus Snape sat on couch staring into the fire, brooding. He was good at ‘brooding’. The hooked nose, long, lanky hair and dark menacing attitude had served him well over the years. Not least of which to keep a bunch of sniveling students in line. Education through intimidation was his motto. Besides, if the little buggers were worried about him, it left them less time to try to blow each other up in his class.

But this time, his broody silence had a cause. *Potter! It always comes back to Potter*, he thought. *Attention seeking do-gooder! Just like his damn father. Every time I turn around, I’m tripping over the boy, or cleaning up after him. The perfect bloody Griffyndor! Why couldn’t he just...*

Snape’s thin lips twisted into a bitter grimace, and he shifted uncomfortably on the couch. While he was an accomplished liar, he made it a point never to lie to himself. And that was just what he was doing. However much he may dislike it, his view of Potter had changed, significantly, in the last few hours.

*How could anyone do that to a child*, he asked himself. *It makes no sense. They started beating this child at the age of three? The real surprise is, not only did Harry survive, but he also managed to hang on to the ability to trust. How...*

His reverie was interrupted by the presence of a hand, holding out a glass of brandy. Taking the glass and glancing up, he smiled his thanks to the striking woman standing before him.

She sat, curling into the corner of the couch so she could turn and face him comfortably. He went back to staring at the fire, thinking.

“What has you looking so ominous tonight? I know it can’t be your first years melting their cauldrons,” she teased. “Classes haven’t started yet!”

Severus leaned back and sipped his brandy. How to explain?

“Serena, you know about my...dislike, for Harry Potter. Merlin knows I’ve ranted about that boy enough times to you. You know my history with his father and godfather. Hell, I’ve told you about the incident with Lupin.”

“I remember,” Serena said, confused. “And you know my feelings on the matter. Why you continue to hold James Potter’s actions against his son, I’ll never know. It’s one of the few bones

of contention between us. In all honesty Severus, has the boy ever done anything to you? How could he? He's a child!"

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose, and then sat up. Placing the brandy snifter on the table, he turned to look at the woman beside him. She stared him, her large almond shaped blue eyes pleading for ...something. Answers? Oh how he wished he could give her some!

"I'm trying to explain, Serena. I'm going to fumble it a bit, I'm sure. I've had a rather rude awakening tonight, and I'm finding myself in the uncomfortable position of having to reevaluate everything I thought to be correct."

Sitting up, the woman tossed her waist length white curly hair behind her shoulders before reaching out and touching his arm. "What's happened, Severus?"

"You know that the Hogwarts Express arrived early today. Turns out, Potter..." Snape ran one hand down his face and cleared his throat. "Harry was injured at home. Badly. No one knew about it until after the train left the station. His injuries were so bad. Once he was taken to the infirmary, Poppy examined him. I was there. Merlin! The boy had broken ribs! Some of the fragments pierced his lung. Had he not gotten to the infirmary when he did, had one of his friends not cast a sustaining spell on him on the train, he would have died!"

The woman looked at him in puzzled horror. "Severus, I know some of the students can get out of hand on the train, but surely..."

"It wasn't a student!" Snape snarled. "His family did it. His family beat him!" His bitter laugh shocked Serena. "Oh yes, Serena. His aunt and uncle nearly beat the boy to death! For the last five years, I've punished that child for the sins of his father. I've punished him for thinking he was a pampered prince, another Draco Malfoy. I've punished him for being a Griffyndor. Hell Serena, I punished him for the perfect life I *assumed* he had. Fame, fortune and a fabulous home life! The perfect Harry Potter. And the whole time...the whole *fucking* time, the boy was suffering something no child should go through!"

"Severus, you're not responsible for what happened to the boy at home. While you may have been unfair to him here at school, your actions didn't cause his family to beat him. Unless you've been sending his aunt and uncle owls I don't know about," she asked, gently teasing.

"Damnit Serena, this isn't funny!" Snape stood and started to pace. "Nothing about this is funny. You wouldn't be teasing if you'd seen his body in the infirmary! He was covered in bruises. Some no older than two days! He spends months in this school, away from that 'family' of his. It's probably the only break he gets from the abuse. And what do I do? Heap it on! That's what I'm good at. I've picked on that child since day one, for no better reason than his name. Potter!"

Serena stood and stopped his pacing by the simple means of standing in front of him. Snape rocked back on his heels and met her eyes. "Serena..." he said, painfully.

She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. "Severus, listen to me. There was no way you could have known what Harry was going through. I agree that your treatment of the boy has been deplorable. But that's not simply because he was abused. You've behaved this way because you've never been able to let go of what happened between you and James. Even with this new information, if you don't let go of the past, you'll be stuck in it forever. And while I'm certainly



glad you're beginning to realize the magnitude of your mistake, I hope it's not only because the child's been abused. Can't you see him as an individual, rather than an extension of his father? He's not James, Severus. He's Harry. He doesn't even remember his father."

Snape finally wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on the top of her white curls. "I find myself in the rare position of having no idea what I'm supposed to do or feel. Obviously everything I thought about Pott...Harry was incorrect. But it's not like I can suddenly befriend the boy, Serena. I'd send him screaming to the infirmary in terror if I tried." He growled in frustration.

"It's going to take time, my love. And, I think, an awareness of your behavior around him. While I'm not saying you should become his best friend, I do think you should moderate your behavior in such a way that you're not always singling him out. While Harry is used to 'Snarky-Snape' and 'Snape-the-Bastard', why not do him a favor and spread your 'Snarky-ness' out, so everyone can enjoy it, rather than just Mr. Potter? You might even find yourself enjoying it." She leaned out slightly and looked up at him with a smirk. "Imagine a room full of fourth years, trembling and in tears. Ah, the possibilities! Hell, you might even be able to make a first year piss his pants!"

Snape grinned down at her, and then chuckled. "No, no, mustn't scare them that badly. Think of the mess that would cause!" He kissed the top of her head, feeling slightly better. Leaning down, he whispered to her, "Let's go to bed, wife."

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### **Hogwarts, Headmasters office...**

Albus Dumbledore was not happy. His plan for Harry has been seriously derailed by this incident, and with the Dursley's out of the picture, he could never return to Privet Drive again. Perhaps he could be persuaded to remain at Hogwarts? Yes, that is probably the best thing for him.

The Headmaster sat down and planned how he would introduce Harry to his planned training schedule.

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### **Breakfast with a lone Marauder...**

The following morning Ron, Hermione and Ginny headed down to the great hall. Ginny and Hermione squealed when they spotted Harry and ran to hug him. Harry winced a bit.

"Easy with me you two. I may be free from Madam Pomfrey, but all the bits and pieces are still a little sore. Especially when I'm getting hugged by the two prettiest witches in school." Ginny sat down next to Harry and looked at him carefully.

"You alright Harry?"

"I'm getting there Gin, but yes I'm much better this morning." He leaned over and kissed her softly, cupping one hand behind her neck.

"Oi Potter! That's my little sister you know?" Harry turned to Ron.

“Mine too, Ron.” he said with a smirk, causing Ron to grin back at him. Harry turned back to Ginny and said “I guess I’ll just have to make sure you go out with the right type of guys from here on out Gin. Sorry.”

Ginny’s face turned beet red.

“Oh Mr. Potter? And what kind of guy is the right type?”

“Why, me of course.” Then he leaned down and kissed her again. She closed her eyes and leaned back into him, then whispered in his ear “I’ll get you for that Mr. Potter.”

Harry smiled and whispered back “You already got me, Gin.”

“How touching, Potty has bagged himself the Weaselette!”

Harry turned to see Crabbe, Goyle and Malfoy, sneering at him. Malfoy buffed his nails and grinned maliciously at Harry.

“Rumor has it you’ve been adopted by the poorest wizarding family in England. You must really be hard up, Potty.”

Ron started to turn red and stand up. Harry reached across the table grabbing his arm pulling him back into his seat. “Let it go Ron. He’s just pissed because he failed to obtain his Death Eater Merit Badge this week.” Turning back to Malfoy, Harry smiled nicely. “I don’t know Malfoy, the Weasleys have a form of wealth you’d never understand. If you’re talking about money, well I do believe I’m worth more than the Malfoy and LeStrange families combined.” Harry eyed Draco up and down, before sniffing, disdainfully. “You may leave now, ferret.” It was a clear dismissal.

Malfoy paled and ground his teeth before he stomped away, his ever present goons in tow.

Ron sat muttering, “Stupid bloody git, one of these days...”

Harry reached over and turned his arm. “Just watch Ron. See what the weather is out side?”

Ron looked up at the enchanted ceiling.

“Yeah it’s raining, what of it?”

“Watch”

All four of them turned to watch Malfoy.

Malfoy strutted over to the Slytherin table and sat down. Suddenly, the charm, echoing the weather outside, became a little too realistic as rain poured down on the Slytherins at the table, and their Head of House at the head table. As everybody jumped up and away from the table, the rain stopped.

One by one they returned to the table with no rain. That is, until Malfoy sat down again.

Sheets of water once more drenched the Slytherin table, its occupants, and Professor Snape.

The Slytherins repeated this process several times until it became apparent that it was Malfoy causing the rain to start.

A very wet, very annoyed Professor Snape stalked down from the Head table and picked up an extremely soggy muffin. Giving the sodden bread to an embarrassed Malfoy, Snape sent him from the Great Hall.

The other tables erupted in laughter.

Ron had huge smile on his face. "That was bloody brilliant!"

Harry grinned back, then shrugged. "'Mischief managed', as the saying goes. Besides, I missed my opportunity to scare him away yesterday."

Hermione frowned. "You know Harry, as Prefect, I'm not supposed to allow that sort of pranking. But it was really impressive." Harry grinned back at Hermione.

Ginny leaned close to Harry and asked, "Are you going to be the only one to have any fun this year?"

Harry whispered in her ear. "Well, I sort of hoped to have some fun with you too Gin, but yeah, if you want to help with the pranks, that's fine by me too." Ginny blushed prettily. At that point Professor McGonagall walked up the aisle handing out class schedules.

"Nice to see you looking better, Mr. Potter. Professor Dumbledore would like to see you this evening after dinner."

"Thank you, Professor."

Harry checked his schedule and groaned, dropping his head to the table and bouncing it up and down. Everyone looked at him concerned.

"I have a double DADA and double Potions tomorrow and both are being taught by Snape? This has got to be a mistake!"

Ron, Ginny and Hermione looked amused. Hermione said, "No, it's not a mistake Harry. Defense is being taught by Professor Severus Snape, and Potions is now being taught by Professor Serena Snape, his wife."

Harry's jaw dropped "Snape got married? What woman was barking mental enough to do that? What is she, a stunted mountain troll?"

Ron snorted through his drink, spraying pumpkin juice all over Hermione. Turning pink, he started to scramble for napkins. Hermione glared at Ron, while Ginny collapsed against Harry, unable to control her laughter. Harry pulled out his wand and performed a cleaning charm on Hermione. She looked at him gratefully, and then turned back to Ron, who was running around the table trying to find more napkins.

“REALLY RONALD WEASELY! WHERE ARE YOUR MANNERS?”

Taking his seat, he looked sheepishly at Hermione. “Sorry ‘Mione, but its not all my fault! You heard what Harry said!”

“I heard him Ron, but that doesn’t excuse your spraying me with pumpkin juice!”

Harry leaned over to Ginny and asked if he could walk her to class. She smiled back up at him and the two walked hand in hand from the great hall, while Ron and Hermione continued their argument.

Harry’s morning schedule for that day was pretty light, just a double Charms with Professor Flitwick. Harry always enjoyed Professor Flitwick. Unlike so many of the Hogwarts teachers, the diminutive professor was fun to be around, and easy to approach. Professor Flitwick would gladly help any student having difficulties, and did his best to make learning Charms fun.

After Charms, Harry visited the library; he wanted to look up information on magic bonds. He knew Hermione had already researched the topic several times in regard to his scar, but it had been bothering him a lot lately and he thought that maybe, just maybe, he might be able to find out more information that Hermione might have missed. He did find one book called “Spells that Bind”. It described a number of spells, which create a magical bond that looked interesting; it even had one, which allowed lovers to feel what the other person was feeling. That caused Harry to blush. The book looked like it might be a good starting point for his research.

After lunch with Ginny, and the still arguing Ron and Hermione, Harry headed off to Transfiguration with the fighting duo and Neville, in tow.

“Welcome to NEWT level Transfiguration,” lectured Professor McGonagall. “In this year we will examine in detail Animagus and the rare Metamorphamagus. We will also examine form altering spells and the Polyjuice potion.”

“For those wishing to see what, if any, animagus form you might have, we have a sign up sheet for a dose of the Animas Revelus potion. It’s a complex potion to brew, and has a very short shelf life. Therefore, we need to know who wants to try it before we have our potions master brew the potion.”

Professor McGonagall passed around the form, with nearly everyone signing it. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville exchanged a look as the signup sheet was passed around. The notable exceptions to the list were Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville. The DA just opened up its campaign of underground training.

Putting the sign up sheet back on her desk, Professor McGonagall continued her lecture.

After Transfiguration, Harry went off to the room of requirement for some personal training. While his abilities had increased enormously over the summer, the one thing he had not been able to do was much in the way of combat training. Harry set the room to use something he had read about, combat trainers. These were simulated opponents, a common training method in muggle militaries. He wasn’t sure what the room would come up with, but it would probably do. Upon entering the room he found it nearly empty. There was a small parchment on the floor and

faceless figure standing against the wall. Scanning the parchment he read how to animate his opponent, speed it up and shut it down.

An hour later, sweaty and still sore from a number of stinging hexes that had broken through his shields, Harry hurried up to his dorm for a quick shower before heading down to the great hall for dinner.

Harry sat down next to Ginny after giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. Hermione looked at Harry, hair still wet and gave him a puzzled look.

“Harry, what have you been doing?”

“I felt the need to do some training in the room, ‘Mione. I was kind of smelly after that, so I needed to shower.”

Professor McGonagall interrupted the conversation, “Mr. Potter, the headmaster has been unavoidably detained on business away from Hogwarts. He asks instead that you see Professor Snape after dinner in his quarters.”

Harry winced inwardly and nodded to Professor McGonagall, “Thank you Professor. I’ll see him after dinner.” McGonagall nodded back and headed up to the teacher’s table.

Ron rolled his eyes at Harry and mumbled around a mouthful of food, “Better you than me, mate!” Hermione frowned at Ron, probably prepared to start her tirade about table manners again, but Harry cut her off.

“‘Mione, lets see if we can try to schedule a DA meeting this week. I’ll probably have to see Dumbledore some time this week though, so lets make it later, say Thursday or Friday.”

“How did your potions go today Ginny? How is Snape’s wife?” Harry asked.

She smiled. “It was the best potions class I’ve ever had! She’s really a nice lady and willing to answer questions. She even prevented me from mixing up my brew today, and didn’t take any points from me!”

“Ok, maybe she’s not a mountain troll,” Harry mused.

“No she’s not! She’s nice. I like her. I only wish the teachers weren’t handing out so much homework. It’s only the first day and I have four 3 foot parchment essays already!”

“Sorry luv, its your owl year. We’ll help you as much as we can,” Hermione and Ron nodded at this, “but expect the teachers to attempt to kill you with work this year.”

Harry looked down at his now empty plate and his shoulders slumped in resignation.

“I guess I had better go see Snape now. Merlin knows I don’t want to give him more reasons to take house points away if I’m late.” Kissing Ginny, he stood and looked at the three. “See you in the common room later?” The three of them smiled encouragingly, nodding at him. Harry walked from the great hall.

## Snape's Quarters...

Harry went down to the dungeon and located Snape's private quarters. With more than a little reluctance, Harry knocked on the door and waited. The door opened, revealing a strange woman Harry had never seen before. She wasn't tall, or short, she had the most strikingly white curly hair he had ever seen. Despite the white hair, she looked younger than Snape. Her hair, combined with her blue eyes and her smile gave her a friendly appearance. If first impressions could be counted on, then Harry felt he just might like this woman.

Serena took in her first view of Harry Potter. *He's just a skinny boy* she thought, and then she corrected herself. *No, he's not a boy...but a young man.* His frame was thin, but it was easy to note a layering of muscle underneath, and his green eyes seemed to almost glow in their intensity. *His eyes alone must have every girl in school chasing him* she thought. But she could sense underneath his exterior there was a fire, a solid core, tempered by the pain he had suffered. *Still suffering*, she again corrected. She could also feel a sense of power, a presence; Harry radiated this without even thinking about it. Severus was good, but he worked hard to present a formidable presence. Harry did the same thing without even trying. She smiled warmly at Harry and motioned him into the apartment.

"You must be Harry Potter. Please, come in. The headmaster informed us that he asked you to stop by this evening. My husband will join us shortly. Would you care for something, Mr. Potter? Or would you prefer I call you Harry?"

Harry appeared confused for a moment, his illusion of a stunted mountain troll shattered forever. He gave her a shy smile and thanked her for the offer, but he was fine, he had just come from dinner in the great hall. Serena motioned him to sit on the couch by the fire. She curled up on the opposite end of the couch facing him.

Severus was walking through the apartment when he paused just outside the living room door. He had heard voices. He stood there, listening. Some habits were hard to break for a man that had spent a long time as a spy for the side of the light.

"So tell me Harry, are you glad to be back at Hogwarts? I know most of my students wish that summer would last all year."

The thought of spending all year with the Dursley's caused Harry to flinch slightly and his complexion paled. He looked bleakly at the fireplace and said, "I'm always glad to be back at Hogwarts. The work isn't that bad, and all my friends are here. Hogwarts is like home to me."

Serena was instantly kicking herself mentally. She had wanted to engage him in small talk until Severus came in, make him feel comfortable and at ease. The last thing she wanted to do was bring up bad memories for him. She smiled at him and touched his arm, "We're glad you're here too, Harry."

At that point Severus Snape walked into the living room. Serena and Harry stood up, Harry nervously. Serena walked over to Severus, gave him a quick hug and whispered in his ear, "Go easy on him tonight Severus. I'll tell you why later." Severus nodded slightly and Serena walked from the room saying, "I look forward to seeing you in my class, Harry."

Severus eyed the boy in front of him.

“Mr. Potter, the headmaster has asked me to evaluate how well you’ve managed to do with your occulmency over the summer. When you are ready, we’ll begin.” He tone was devoid of the usual sarcastic sneer he normally used when addressing Harry in the past.

Harry took a cleansing breath. He then nodded to signal his readiness, his face masked, his wand at the ready. Snape snapped up his wand.

“Legilimens!”

At first, Snape thought the spell hadn’t worked. There was nothing, just nothing, and then he felt it. It was a wall; it stretched as far as his mind could see in every direction. He tried pushing against the wall and it didn’t budge. Beads of sweat appeared on his brow as he tried hammering against the wall. He didn’t have the strength to break it! Remembering his legilimency training, he started searching along the wall for a flaw, a crack, something he could wedge open. Finally he found a small flaw and wormed his way in only to discover...ANOTHER WALL? And what’s worse, the flaw he had entered through wasn’t there anymore! He was trapped! He searched for a bit and then the outer wall dropped away allowing him to leave.

Snape gasped in a shuddering breath and swayed, trembling. Serena, who had been watching from the doorway rushed to his side. Disdaining any help from his wife, he straightened up and stared at Harry. Serena turned towards Harry so that her husband couldn’t see her face, and grinned, devilishly. Harry gaped at her for a moment, but was interrupted.

“That was most impressive Mr. Potter,” Snape said as he steadied himself. “I’ll inform the headmaster that it seems you have mastered Occulmency. You may go now, Harry.”

Harry turned towards the door and started to walk out when he stopped and turned around again.

“Professor?” he asked in a hesitant voice.

Both of them looked at Harry and Severus replied “Yes, Mr. Potter?”

Harry looked down at the carpet, his face flaming again.

“I talked with Remus Lupin a lot about what my father and Sirius did to you Sir, what I saw in your pensieve that night. I know this isn’t as good as it should be...I mean, they’re not here and can’t do it themselves...what I mean is...” Harry stopped, inhaled deeply and raised his eyes to his teacher. “Sir, I’d like to apologize for what they did. They were wrong, and I’m sorry for it.”

Harry felt a deep sense of shame and embarrassment, but this was something that had to be said. Even if Snape brushed it off, he had to say it.

Snape felt an upwelling of anger at the mention of the pensieve, but Serena touched his arm, calming him. He looked over at his wife and could see the unspoken appeal in her eyes. He nodded to her. “Thank you for that Mr. Pot...Harry. I know we can’t change the past between us, so lets try to work on a better future.”

Harry looked up and gave them a weak smile, then left the apartment. It was time to join his friends in the Griffyndor common room.

### **Headmaster's office, Hogwarts...**

Albus Dumbledore had just returned from a most frustrating experience. He's spent most of his day at the Ministry of Magic. He went there in the hope of starting the process to overturn the temporary custody order issued by Magistrate Janicak and found himself shunted from office to office, filing out form after form, only to be told he'd need to restart the process, because he was missing a stamp on one form. Just when he thought everything had been corrected, he was informed that the proceedings could not take place for another sixty days. Director Bones had opened a formal investigation into irregularities that occurred sixteen years ago, when Harry was placed with the muggles. On top of which, he found, that until the Dursley's trial, there could be no formal placement proceedings. All this boiled down to one simple fact. The temporary order issued by Magistrate Janicak would become permanent, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Dumbledore paced back and forth, considering his options. First off, he was surprised by the apparent hostility Harry had towards him. Surely he wasn't still blaming him for Sirius's death! No, something else was bothering the boy, but he didn't know what it was. The boy must be convinced that Dumbledore's way was what was best for him. He also considered the issue of young Miss Weasley. That could not be allowed to continue. Harry needed to concentrate all of his efforts on training and not become romantically entangled. No, he'd nip that in the bud as soon as possible, even if it meant expelling her from the school.

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### **Back in Snape's apartment...**

Severus and Serena watched Harry leave their apartment and Severus shuddered slightly with the memory of what Harry had managed to do to him. Serena watched him closely.

"Severus, take a breath and tell me what just happened."

"That... that... boy... he has the most incredible shields I have ever seen Serena. He deliberately laid a trap for me and I blindly walked into it. He could have killed me in a blink of an eye. Instead, he showed me the trap, held me there for a moment, and then let me out. I've never heard or seen anything like it. It's like he's taken Occulmency to a mastery and beyond."

"Severus, he never once lifted his wand, I watched it all from the doorway. In fact, as soon as you cast the spell, he pocketed his wand and looked at me. Then he smiled and winked at me!"

"Well it's true, a master of Occulmens doesn't need the wand to break the connection. Normally they have shields, which are strong enough that they don't need a wand to distract an opponent. We only train students to use the wand as a way of distracting the person casting the Legilimens. Now, what was it you wanted to tell me about Serena?"

Serena sat back a moment considering how to phrase what she had to say. Severus wasn't stupid, and he really wasn't arrogant, but he didn't take criticism well. Severus looked at his wife. Although they had been married only a few short months, he knew that look of hers. She was ordering her thoughts to begin one of "those" discussions. The type of discussion that he was coming to learn all husbands feared and dreaded above all others. She placed a hand on his arm and began.



“Severus, first off let me say, you handled his apology very well. Far better than I thought you would. I’m proud of you for that. On the other hand, I looked at him and I saw a young man that’s been treated brutally most of his life, burdened with a fame that embarrasses him. He’s very brittle, just barely started on a road to recovery. He has an extraordinary low sense of self-esteem, and seems to be easily wounded. One off hand comment of mine made him feeling like I told him his favorite pet had died. I don’t know what plans for him our headmaster might have, but I’ve been around enough healers in my capacity as a Potions Mistress to know he needs help, Severus. One strong push and he might snap. You’ve always seen him in a peculiar kind of way Severus, but that boy just radiates power, and if he’s pushed the wrong way, we’ll have no one but ourselves to blame for creating another dark lord!”

Severus’s eyes snapped shut at that thought and he shuddered. No, Serena was right, Potter was at a crossroads. The wrong kind of push could send him completely in the wrong direction. Severus rubbed his eyes hard.

“Oh Merlin, what a mess this is Serena. You saw him tonight. We made a bit of a peace, but he won’t accept any help from me. Our peace is too new for that.”

“Well I’m not a mind healer, but maybe he’ll accept some help from me. I’ve been around mind healers enough to know the basics; I’ll also keep my ear out on the rumor network to see if I can find out some additional information about him. I’m concerned Severus. That boy is in trouble and crying out for help, but so few of us are listening. What about the other teachers? Should we bring this to their attention? Maybe Poppy as well?”

“That’s probably a good idea Serena. Why not invite them to lunch tomorrow? We can talk about it here.”

“I’ll do that first thing in the morning.”

Severus pulled Serena close to him and said, “How did I ever get so lucky to find you?”

Her eyes sparkled at that. “You got yourself injured severely enough to be given over to my tender care. Besides,” she continued with a wicked grin, “you didn’t get lucky. I decided you were suitable and set out to ensnare you with my wiles.”

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### **Back in the Griffyndor Common Room...**

Harry entered the Griffyndor common room. It was late, and many of the students had already gone off to bed. Ginny was sitting at one of the tables, working on an essay. Ron and Hermione were sitting on one of the couches by the fire, talking.

Ron looked up as Harry entered the common room. “Hey mate, what did Snape want?”

“He wanted to test my Occulmency shields,” said Harry with a wry grin. Ron and Ginny grinned back at him. Since they had all started working with wandless magic, they had picked up a fair amount of Occulmency as well.

“Do you want to join us on the couch Harry?” asked Hermione.

“Nah, you two will eventually start snogging each other and I’d rather not watch that. I have a book I want to read and I think I’ll sit with Ginny to keep her company.”

Harry walked over to Ginny and leaned over to kiss the top of her head, then playfully he leaned a little further down and nipped at her earlobe sending shivers up and down her spine. She watched him as he sat down and pulled out two books, one apparently blank.

“Do you mind some company, Miss Weasley?” he said.

“Not at all, Mr. Potter.”

Ginny turned back to her essay and Harry turned to his book, both taking comfort from the presence of the other.

## **Chapter 4    Dumbledore Vs Harry, film at 11.**

### **Headmaster’s office, early morning...**

The door to the Headmaster’s office opened and Professors Snape and McGonagall stepped in. Albus Dumbledore sat in his chair at the desk.

“Ah, good morning Minerva, Severus. Come in. Would either of you care for a cup of tea?”

Both teachers declined the offer. Minerva moved to sit in one of the three chairs before the Headmaster’s desk, while Severus leaned against the wall near the window, overlooking the Hogwarts grounds.

“I have a couple items of business to attend to today concerning Harry Potter. First off Severus, I know you’d rather not give up any of your free time now that you’re married, but can you see fit to squeeze in some time for Mr. Potter’s Occulmency lessons, now that you’ve had a chance to evaluate his skill?”

“Headmaster, Potter doesn’t need lessons from me. To be frank, the little bugger is probably capable of teaching you at this point!” Snape said with more than a little exasperation.

Professor McGonagall looked down at the carpet and smirked briefly. Although she had always tried to be strict and fair with her students, she’d always had a bit of a soft spot for Harry, and to hear what Severus had said was high praise indeed. She couldn’t help but feel a bit of pride in what her Gryffindor had done.

“Ah... well that wasn’t what I expected, but it is welcome news nevertheless. Minerva, here is a copy of Harry’s new schedule. Due to...ahem... his unique circumstances, I feel it’s necessary to enhance his education here at Hogwarts.”

Minerva accepted the parchment from the Headmaster and glanced at it briefly, then looked again. *THIS CAN’T BE RIGHT!* She thought. Severus watched McGonagall’s face blanch after reading the parchment.

Just then the door opened. As instructed by Professor McGonagall, Harry arrived in the Headmaster's office before breakfast.

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### **Harry Vs Dumbledore...**

Harry walked into the office, and found that the Headmaster was not alone. Professor Snape leaned against the wall near the window, an unreadable expression on his face. As Harry walked towards Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall stood up from one of the three chairs placed before the desk and indicated that he should take the middle seat.

After pleasantries were exchanged and the obligatory Lemon Drop offered, Harry began to grow uncomfortable. It was obvious that the Headmaster had something on his mind. Whatever it was, Harry had a feeling he wasn't going to like it much.

"Well Harry, I'm sure you're wondering why I've asked you here," Dumbledore said.

"Yes sir, I was. As Professor Snape is here, I had assumed it was about my Occulmency lessons."

"No Harry, not Occulmency. Professor Snape has assured me that you no longer require lessons, as you've come to master that talent. Is that not correct, Severus?"

Harry stared at Dumbledore for a moment, before turning in his chair to look at the dark professor by the window. Snape nodded to indicate that the Headmaster was correct in his assessment, before walking over to take the third chair. Harry had the unpleasant feeling that he was about to be ganged up on.

"Harry, it's come to my attention that you've been spending a lot of your free time with Miss Weasley. Is that correct?"

"Yes sir," Harry said, puzzled. He'd never known the Headmaster to pry into the personal, romantic relationships between the students of Hogwarts before.

"Do you think that wise, Harry?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Are you not concerned about the danger your relationship places Miss Weasley in? You are a target, Harry. Anyone close to you can be used against you."

"Yes sir, I've thought about that. Whatever else you may think Headmaster, I am aware of the danger."

"Excellent, Harry. Then I'm sure you will agree with me when I say that you dating Miss Weasley must end. While I'm sure the girl will be upset, I'm positive it's for the best." Dumbledore smiled at Harry, his eyes twinkling merrily. "Now then, I think we should move on to..."

"Wait, sir. Break up with Ginny? Why on earth would I do that?" Harry sat rigidly in his chair.

Dumbledore frowned. “Harry, didn’t we just discuss the danger to...”

*Calmly*, Harry reminded himself. *Keep yourself calm and collected. Anger won’t help.*

“Yes, Headmaster. However, Ron and Hermione, through their friendship with me, have been in danger for years. You’ve never been concerned about that in the past. Nor have you ever told me to give up those friendships. In fact, you’ve encouraged them. So why would I break up with Ginny? With respect sir, your argument makes little sense.”

Harry cringed as he heard himself say those last words. He fully expected either Professors McGonagall or Snape to tear strips out of him for his comment. Strangely, neither said a word. He didn’t dare look at them though, afraid it might invite remark.

Dumbledore looked at Harry, puzzled for a moment. “Perhaps we should come back to this later. I think, once you hear the rest, you’ll understand.”

Harry nodded and, unsure where this was going, slipped down in his chair slightly.

“Harry, I think what you need to be spending your time on now is Charms, Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts. With that in mind, you’ll be dropping Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology. You won’t have time for those classes, and because of your special circumstances, they really are not needed for your education. Due to the level of coursework you will be covering in these classes, your schedule this year will be much different than anything you’ve had before. As such, you will also be dropping Quidditch.”

Dumbledore stopped, picked up a few pieces of parchment from his desk, and gave one of them to Harry to look over. “I think you’ll find everything you need to know about your new schedule is there. Due to the time involved in your new studies, I do not believe you will have much time for a relationship with Miss Weasley, hence my...suggestion that a relationship may not be appropriate right now. If you have any questions, please let me know.” It was a clear dismissal.

Harry glanced at the parchment, blinked and sat up straight. *This can’t be right, can it? Breakfast at 6am, classes all day, dinner at 9pm. Weekend classes? HOLIDAY classes? What is this garbage?*

Harry looked at McGonagall and asked, “Have you seen this, Professor?”

“Yes, Mr. Potter, I have. As your Head of House, the Headmaster thought I should be aware of your new schedule.”

“And you approve of this?” Harry asked in disbelief.

McGonagall’s lips tightened for a moment and her expression became very stern. “No, Mr. Potter, if you must know. I do not approve of the Headmaster’s new schedule. I believe that a *well-rounded* education is essential for everyone, as is time off from studies and the pressure of grades.”

Harry read through the schedule one last time, before placing it back on the Headmaster's desk. Looking into Dumbledore's eyes, Harry said quietly, "I think I'll keep my current schedule as it stands now, sir."

"I don't think you understand, Harry. The new schedule is not up for debate. It's already been..."

"No sir, I don't think *you* understand," Harry interrupted, patiently. "I will not be changing my schedule. I do agree that Quidditch needs to go. I had already decided to drop it and spend more time on my studies. However, your 'suggestion' that I break up with Miss Weasley started, not as a factor of how much time I would have under your new schedule, but rather the amount of 'danger' she would be in. Which is it sir?"

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. "It is both, Mr. Potter," he said with some heat. "Your new schedule does not permit time for romantic entanglements. And due to your circumstances, you will be placing the young woman in a great deal of danger by continuing your relationship with her. I'm sure her parents, your new guardians, would not approve of their daughter taking such a risk. You do not wish to jeopardize your place in *their home*, do you?"

"As I have already asked Mr. and Mrs. Weasley for permission to date Ginny, and received their whole-hearted approval, I do not think my relationship with her will cause any problems in *my home*, sir. Nor do I see how my personal life is any of your business."

The Headmaster sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly. Looking up, he saw a slight smile on Minerva's face. Severus looked bored by the whole thing. *Time to take another track*, he thought to himself.

Sitting up, he folded his hands on the desktop and look at Harry over his half moon spectacles.

"Harry, the new schedule is important. This is something that must be done. I know you do not see it that way now, but in time you will. To that end, I am perfectly willing to expel Miss Weasley from this school. Either way, you will not be seeing her."

Both Snape and McGonagall gaped that this.

*The man is barking! He's gone completely mental! This is not happening. It can't be. Expel Ginny because she's dating me? What the hell is going on here?* Looking at Dumbledore, his eyes narrowed in thought. *This has come quicker than I thought. Remember what Sirius told you before the hearing at the Ministry. 'Keep your temper...be polite'*

"You would expel Ginny because she was going out with me?" Harry asked for clarification. "I do not believe the Board of Governors would go along with that, sir."

"Suitable reason can be found for her expulsion, Mr. Potter. I assure you, the Board of Governors will find no fault in whatever reason I come up with."

"So, you would lie? Interesting."

"It would not be a lie," snapped Dumbledore. "Whatever reason I give the Board would be a factual, legitimate reason for expulsion!"

“As I said, it would be a lie,” Harry snapped back angrily. As Dumbledore started to interrupt, Harry cut him off, his temper frayed. “You and I both know Ginny has done nothing to warrant expulsion from Hogwarts. Either way, it matters very little. As you know, I inherited the Black family fortune when Sirius died. Combined with what my parents left me, I have more than enough money to pay for private tutors for Ginny. And while I’m sure that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would be disappointed with Ginny’s expulsion, I think they would be more disappointed in the fact that the leader of the Order expelled her in the first place, on purely contemptible grounds!”

The Headmaster stood up, angrier than Harry had ever seen him. “Mr. Potter! I’ve put up with much from you over the years…”

Harry jumped out of his chair. His temper exploded and he started to yell. “Put up with? Oh, I like that!” The three adults in the room drew back as they felt the waves of magic radiating off the teenager before them. “Hogwarts is supposed to be safe for all students! Yet, in my first year, I had to face Voldemort because you failed to adequately protect the Sorcerer’s Stone. In my second year, I faced him again, while you, as Headmaster couldn’t even find the Chamber! Ginny would have died if it hadn’t been for me! Where was her protection? In the fourth year you allowed Cedric and myself to be kidnapped right out from under your nose, and we all know how that turned out!” The window Snape had been standing beside when Harry entered the room shattered outward with an explosive sound, the room rumbled ominously, and the fireplace flared to a roaring flame.

Grabbing the edge of the desk in front of him, Harry looked down and inhaled deeply, trying to rein in his temper and think.

After a few shocked, silent moments, Harry once again looked at Dumbledore, taking in the stunned expression on the old wizard’s face. “Let us be clear on some things sir,” Harry said, more politely, and in a calmer tone of voice than he’d managed since entering the office. “If you expel Ginny, I will leave the school. I’ve taken my O.W.L.s, and I can hire tutors for Ginny to complete hers, even if she wants to go on to N.E.W.T level. I can hire tutors for myself as well. Once that is done, I will immediately *expel* the Order from Grimmauld Place, and Ginny and I will be taught there.

If you chose not to expel her, I still will not follow your *schedule*, sir. I am no puppet. I will not dance to your tune. My current schedule stands. I refuse to allow you to ruin my life anymore than you already have.” As Dumbledore tried once more to interrupt, Harry’s voice hardened. “It is not up for debate! With all due respect, Headmaster, my life is just that. *Mine*. What I choose to do with it, and whom I choose to share it with is, quite frankly, none of your business. I will kill Voldemort, or die in the attempt. But I will do so on *my* terms, not yours. If I feel I need counsel, I will choose my counselors, not you. Your attempts to manage me, and my affairs, end now. Quite frankly Headmaster I no longer trust you or consider us to be on the same side. The only thing in common we share is an enemy and I’ll deal with him my way, not yours.”

Harry picked up Dumbledore’s schedule from the desk, walked over to the fire and tossed it in. As he turned back to the Headmaster, he noticed Professor McGonagall’s expression of shocked surprise and, strangely, Professor Snape’s look of approval.

“With those facts in mind, Headmaster, I believe our meeting is over. Good day Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape.” With that, Harry left the office.

Albus Dumbledore sat back down heavily, feeling very old all of a sudden. The power Harry had radiated in that brief outburst had been an overwhelming assault on his mental shields and he felt like he had been pummeled from head to toe.

McGonagall and Snape exchanged a quick look and exited the office. Dumbledore never even noticed their departure.

Outside of the headmaster's office McGonagall placed a hand on Severus's arm.

"Severus, please tell Serena I will be happy to join you for lunch today."

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### **Breakfast...**

Harry's trip from the Headmasters office to the great hall would have made Snape proud! The front of his robe open, Harry's brisk walk caused the back to billow out like some avenging caped hero. His face was set in a tight scowl and his eyes glowed an intense green. Harry didn't notice any of this, nor did he notice some of the younger students scurrying out of his path. He walked entirely on automatic pilot as he concentrated his entire being on the soothing internal sound of his phoenix. He had released enormous amounts of energy, but had managed to keep most of it in check. Had he released it all, it was quite likely the Headmaster's office would have ceased to exist. As he walked, the energy slowly bled off him as he listened to the calming phoenix song running through his head.

Entering the great hall, Ron looked up and spotted Harry entering. He nudged Hermione who spotted Harry a second later.

Hermione took a second look and breathed "Oh Merlin!" as Harry walked to his spot next to Ginny and sat down; his eyes still alight with power. Ron and Hermione exchanged a look between themselves then turned back to Harry. Ginny placed a hand on Harry's arm, she could feel him trembling slightly, but her touch was both comforting and calming.

"Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Later... we'll talk about this later I promise." Taking a deep breath he closed his eyes briefly and worked on centering himself. When he reopened his eyes they had returned to normal again. He leaned over to Ginny and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled shyly at him. Ron and Hermione visibly relaxed as they could see Harry had regained control over himself. Hermione turned to Ron to continue their conversation. Hermione picked up her tea and frowned.

"I really wish I had some apple juice today. Tea just isn't doing it for me this morning."

Ron got a smile on his face and said, "Allow me my lady!" With a flick and a swish he transformed Hermione's cup of tea into a tall glass of Apple Juice. She smiled at Ron warmly and took a huge gulp. Hermione's face screwed up in a grimace and she sprayed the juice all over Ron!

"RONALD! That was APPLE VINEGEAR!"

Ron was busy trying to wipe off his robe and looking at Hermione with a “What did I do?” look.

Hermione began to heatedly lecture Ron on transfiguration and how he never listens in class. Suddenly she stopped. Something was wrong! What was it? Ginny was sitting at her place at the table trying very hard not to laugh. And Harry? Where was Harry? She could hear him. Harry had slid off his chair and was currently under the table laughing so hard tears were streaming down his face. Ron started to snicker, and that was it for Ginny. Pushed over the edge, she joined Harry under the table, laughing.

Hermione took on a pained look and started to giggle with the rest of them.

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### **Transfiguration Class...**

Harry, Ron and Hermione headed off to their first class, transfiguration. They noticed Professor McGonagall standing by the door of the classroom. She handed Harry a note when he entered. This immediately set Harry to worrying. After the disastrous early morning meeting, surely this could only be more bad news!

As the rest of the class filed in, he opened the letter.

*Mr. Potter,*

*While I do not approve of the tone you took with the Headmaster this morning, you may rest assured that I wholeheartedly approve of your actions. As long as I remain Deputy Headmistress, I will not allow any harm to be done to either you or Miss Weasley's education. If necessary I will personally go to the board of Governors for you.*

*Minerva McGonagall*

*Deputy Headmistress, Hogwarts.*

Harry slumped in his chair with relief and looked up at Professor McGonagall, he mouthed a “Thank you” to her and for a brief moment, she allowed just a touch of a smile to appear on her face.

Professor McGonagall faced her class. “For those of you that signed up for the Revealus Animus potion, you will be taking those doses today. Not everyone can make the transformation so do not be upset if the potion does not work for you. As I call your name, come up to the desk and take your dose, then return to your desk. The potion will put you into a short sleep of less than five minutes. When you awaken you will have a firm idea of what your form will be.

For those that did not sign up for the potion dose, please turn to chapter 38 in your textbook and begin the exercise in conjuring base metals.”

Professor McGonagall started to call from her list of students One by one they came up and took a dose of the potion and returned to their desks. In between calling the names she happened to glance up and noticed that the five of the six students who hadn't signed up for the potion dose were staring at the sixth. Harry Potter. Harry sat at his desk, small flashes of light seemed to flare off the end of his wand as he jabbed it slightly towards the desk. By now most of the students still awake had turned to watch Harry. Harry seemed to be oblivious to it all. His eyes appeared glazed over and he sat with a smile on his face as he continued working.



Minerva got up from her desk and made her way around the class to come up behind Harry. She wanted to see what he was doing. She was sure whatever it was it wasn't his assigned work. Coming up silently behind him, she gasped.

Floating above Harry's desk was a small spinning cube of metal. With each jab of his wand a piece would disappear. Entranced, even Minerva watched as Harry slowly formed a ring out of the silver metal. Harry seemed to be almost in a trance. His wand making rapid jabs towards the spinning band. He wasn't saying the spells. In fact, his lips were barely moving at all. His expression was best described as serene.

When the ring was complete, and without taking any sort of break, he slowly carved a shape out of one side by conjuring more metal and fusing it to the ring. Slowly but surely, a finely detailed phoenix appeared on the rings' face. As a final touch, he conjured two small green gems to mount into the eye sockets. Finally, the ring floated down to the desk and he seemed to shake himself slightly and sigh, like he was disappointed that it was over. Minerva placed her hand on his shoulder and he looked up startled.

"That was fine work Mr. Potter. May I see the ring please?"

Harry handed the professor the ring. He looked embarrassed, even a little ashamed, like he had been caught peeking into the girl's bathroom. "I was hoping I could keep it Professor", he added.

She peered down over her glasses and smiled at him. "I assure you Mr. Potter, I will return the ring to you by dinner. This is excellent work."

Shortly after that the class ended. McGonagall shouted out homework assignments to the rapidly disappearing students.

After Transfiguration Harry, Ron and Hermione headed off to their first potions class with Mrs. Professor Snape. It was a drastic and shocking experience to the trio. The classroom was brightly lit and Professor Snape welcomed questions. To their amazement, not a single house lost any points!

Two hours later the trio headed off to lunch.

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### **Informal Teacher's Conference...**

Around a table in Professor Snape's private quarters sat a carefully selected group of teachers. Severus and Serena Snape, Professor McGonagall, still clutching Harry's Ring, Professor Flitwick, Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout.

Serena stood up and faced the group.

"I've asked you all here today because I'm very concerned about one of our students. A student we all have in our classes, and one Poppy's attended on numerous occasions.

I'm sure by now you've all heard about what condition Harry Potter arrived in here at Hogwarts this year. The simple fact is, he has suffered under years of abuse, and if what Severus told me

today is true, some of that abuse has been as a direct result of actions taken by our Headmaster. I'm afraid for Harry. He has very low self-esteem and one wrong action on our part either way could push him too far. If we're not careful, he could turn out to be another Dark Lord."

Everyone around the table shuddered at the thought.

"As you know, before I came to Hogwarts I worked at St. Mungos. Very often I was called to help patients that had undergone traumatic experiences and I often got to see mind healers work with their patients. I know that rebuilding someone's self-esteem is a slow, painstaking process, involving a lot of positive reinforcement. Now mind you, I'm not saying that we should let a bad grade slide or anything. But what I'm asking is that you take a little extra time to compliment his work when it deserves complimenting.

According to what I've heard, he's grown quite attached to Miss Weasley and she seems to have a very positive influence on him. I'm going to schedule a conference between myself, Mrs. Weasley and Miss Weasley to enlist their aid in helping Harry recover from his years of abuse. I'm hoping all of you will help with this. We owe it to Harry and ourselves to look out for him."

Minerva snorted then spoke, "I can't recall another student with the power he has. It's almost frightening. What he did this morning; he lost control for a brief instant and then pulled himself together. I don't think he got nearly as angry as he could have gotten! And if that isn't proof enough of his capabilities, take a look at this..." She handed the ring to Professor Flitwick to pass around.

Flitwick looked at the ring carefully, then frowned. "This isn't..." Minerva interrupted him, "Yes Finius, that ring is Palladium, the Phoenix is Gold and he used Emeralds for the eyes. He conjured noble metals and precious gems!"

Everyone around the table gasped at that. Supposedly, a wizard or witch could easily conjure base metals, but no wizard has been able to conjure noble metals since the age of Merlin. The ring was passed around from teacher to teacher.

Minerva continued, "The really strange thing was as he worked he seemed to be in a state of peace, like he found what he was doing very relaxing and enjoyable. His expression bordered on sensual while he made that ring. I can't say I've ever seen anything like it, but it did seem to ease his tension considerably."

Poppy nodded and said "That is one of the first good things I've heard today. A creative outlet is a great way for him to work out some of his issues. I think we should encourage this. It's a common therapeutic technique; even the muggles use it. Ordinarily I'd suggest calling in a mind healer, but I don't think Harry would take that too well. I'm quite afraid it's entirely up to us."

Severus looked around the table, then pointedly at McGonagall before speaking.

"This morning, Minerva and I witnessed Professor Dumbledore and Harry get into a major argument. I won't go into any specific details except to say that the Headmaster threatened Harry's rights to his education, and the rights of Miss Weasley. Harry stood up to the Headmaster and basically told him to sod off. Dumbledore threatened and Harry counter threatened, and poked gaping holes in our Headmaster's arguments. Minerva, I hesitate to suggest this, but

Dumbledore has known you the longest and respects your opinion the most. Perhaps you can talk with him and make him see his errors?"

Professor McGonagall put on her sternest teacher expression and glared at Severus for a while before nodding reluctantly.

Serena looked at her colleagues saying, "Well I will be the first to say it, but this has made me feel a lot better. We know what we need to do. We have a boy that needs help and he's going to get it. Shall we all get back to class before our students give us detention?"

The group chuckled, Minerva pocketed the ring and they left the apartment.

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### **Dinner in the great hall...**

Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were having a conversation at the Gryffindor table when Professor McGonagall interrupted them. Handing back the ring to Harry she smiled at him and said, "Most excellent work Mr. Potter! If you don't mind me saying, I wouldn't mind seeing what else you're capable of doing."

Harry was never very good at being on the receiving end of a compliment, even one from the normally stoic Professor McGonagall. He tried to stammer out a reply, but McGonagall overrode him. "Nonsense Mr. Potter! You have quite a creative eye and should be proud of work like that." With that McGonagall headed up to the teacher's table. Hermione was eyeing the ring in Harry's hand.

"Harry, what did you use to make that ring?"

"Well the phoenix is gold, the eyes are emeralds..." He trailed off as she paled.

"Harry, you conjured noble metals and gems?"

Harry looked at Hermione with a puzzled expression on his face.

"What's a noble metal 'Mione?"

Hermione just rolled her eyes at Harry and leaned against Ron's shoulder shaking her head. Ron wrapped an arm around her and patted her back before saying, "Don't take it too hard 'Mione. He's just a guy and doesn't understand this girly stuff!" That caused Hermione to jerk back and Ginny to break into a fit of giggles. Ron looked perplexed.

"Wha... what did I say?"

Ginny took the ring from Harry and looked it over carefully before handing it back to Harry. "It's really quite beautiful Harry. I've never seen anything so pretty."

Harry suddenly got very shy. He was in totally unknown territory here. "Would... would... would you like me to make one for you Ginny? It isn't hard, and I find it sort of relaxing."

Ginny beamed up at him and gave him one of those hugs that immediately made him think a cold shower might be appropriate. Looking across the table he noted that Hermione was looking wistfully at Ginny. He chuckled and said, "Don't worry 'Mione. I can make one for each of us, including my pumpkin juice spewing brother."

Hermione sat back on her bench and gave Harry a quizzical eye. She'd just had an interesting idea; now to figure out a way to test it.

After dinner, Harry told the others he'd meet them in the common room in an hour or so. He had something he wanted to do. With that he headed off to the room of requirement for more training.

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### **Much later that same night, Leaving Headmaster's office...**

Minerva McGonagall slipped from the Headmaster's office and headed off to her Gryffindor private quarters. It hadn't been easy, but she had *finally* made the Headmaster see her point. *Merlin that man is stubborn, once he gets an idea in his head its nearly impossible to budge him from it.* She thought. She smirked to herself and continued walking. No, it hadn't been easy, but she had finally gotten to do what she had always wanted to do; dress Albus Dumbledore down like a third year caught in the act of sneaking into the girl's dorm!

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### **Inside the Headmaster's office...**

The echoes of Minerva McGonagall strident voice still rang in his head. He stared out the window, but he didn't really see anything. Albus felt worn down, and oh so tired.

Minerva had raged at him, threatened to personally report him to BOTH the Ministry and the Board of Governors. She pointedly told him his behavior was patently unfair and illegal. But it was two comments she made before leaving that cut him to the bone, wounded him so deep and he knew they were true.

*"Oh Albus can you not see it? The boy is so much like Tom Riddle, raised by uncaring and cruel people. One strong push and he'll turn dark Albus and you very nearly gave him that push today! He desperately wants to be loved Albus and you nearly took that away from him"*

*"Tell me Albus, how can the boy be expected to fight for the light when your denying him everything that is good and wholesome?"*

Albus wept. He wept because of how close he had come to ruining all their hopes for a safe future. He wept because he had damaged something precious in his attempt to secure that future. Most of all he wept for Harry. He had hurt him greatly and couldn't see a way of fixing it.

Fawkes, from his perch behind Albus, crooned a soft song of consolation. He was glad his friend had finally come to his senses. The past months had strained their relationship. The Phoenix / Human bond was strong only so long as the human remained firmly entrenched in the light. Albus might not have been able to feel it, but Fawkes did. Over the months the bond had weakened considerably. *Humans are such strange creatures*, Fawkes thought to himself. *They*

*could move from the light to the dark unchecked.* In fact, Fawkes knew of only two humans that could not move back and forth like that.

Albus Dumbledore stared out his window, not really seeing anything and pondered his next move. He decided to leave Harry be. He'd let Harry become as normal a teenage wizard as possible. Their relationship was ruined, burned in the fire of Albus's zeal, but perhaps slowly, and only if Harry initiated it, they could build a new relationship.

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### **The first DA Meeting...**

That Thursday evening was the first DA Meeting. Not much would be accomplished here. Harry would have to explain his plans and try to convince everyone to see his point of view.

He paced nervously up on the dais the room had provided for him. There were a lot more people here than last year, the core group of about forty people, and nearly sixty newcomers. They had decided to open up the membership to the third years who would be trained for a specific task, and many of the current students hearing how well the original DA had done in the OWLS wanted to join.

Harry looked nervously at the larger than expected crowd. Ginny and Hermione smiled reassuringly up at him, Neville gave him a 'thumbs up'. Ron closed the door to the room and signaled to Harry to start.

Harry coughed nervously drawing everyone's attention while Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Neville and Luna joined him on the dais. Harry stepped forward. He started off nervously, but as he talked, his voice took on a note of confidence and command.

"Last year, six of our members took an ill fated trip to the Ministry of Magic where they proceeded to capture eleven high level death eaters, and I personally fought Voldemort again." He paused while the room collectively gasped. He rolled his eyes at the sound. *I'll deal with that later.*

"This year, we're going to be reorganizing the DA. We will continue teaching dueling, but we're planning on adding a twist to the idea. Before I go into that however, I'm afraid I'll need to weed out the serious from the not so serious. If you're currently in your OWL or NEWT exam years, you might want to reconsider being a member of the DA. The DA will take up a lot of your time. If you feel that the time used here would impact your studies, you may wish to leave.

Now, I'd like to see a show of hands as I ask questions. If you feel that the question makes you unwilling to commit to being in the DA, lower your hand. Those remaining at the end of the questions with their hands still up will be asked to see Hermione. You'll be required to give her a wizard's oath. If you put your hand down, we'll ask you to exit the room, no hard feelings."

"How many of you want to survive this war we're in?" Everyone raised his or her hand.

"How many of you are willing to commit to learning how to survive, at least two hours per day, everyday, maybe more?" At least thirty hands dropped at that point and people started to head to the exit. Harry waited for them to file out.

“How many of you are not only willing to fight to defend yourselves, but want to fight back, to take this war to Voldemort himself if necessary?” Another twenty or so people dropped their hand and exited the room. Harry waited again until they were gone.

“How many of you are willing to fight, willing to put your lives on the line for your family, for your friends, for someone you don’t even know, just because you know you’re doing the right thing?” The room remained silent. People looked around, hands still in the air. Harry smiled.

“Those of you remaining, welcome to the new DA! Please step over to Hermione. She has a little present for each of you after you give your oath.”

The crowd milled around Hermione as she and Luna took wizard’s oaths and passed out the Phoenix rings Harry had made.

Harry stood off to one side, watching impassively as the oaths were taken. His mind was whirling with ideas and concepts. He had his core group now. He listened to the murmurs of pleasure, from the girls in particular, as the rings were examined. It wasn’t the same ring as the first one he had made, nor the same as the ones he had given to Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna. He’d probably better explain those first before getting into the really mind stretching stuff.

“Ok settle down people. Let me start off by explaining a few things that have already happened, and are going to happen. First off, those people who left the room passed through a charm on the door which Obliviated all memory of what happened here. The DA is secret. Don’t talk about it to your mates. Don’t talk about it to your teachers. Don’t talk about it to your family. We’ve all taken an oath to that.

The rings you’ve been given are Phoenix Rings, made by myself. Each ring is charmed with some specific things. Tap the ring once with your wand and it will provide you with extra warmth, tap it twice and it cools you off. There is also a minor shield charm on it that will reduce damage to you if you’re hit with a spell. Not a lot, but sometimes even a little reduction can mean the difference between living and dying. Finally, if there is a problem, if you’re in danger, or hurt and alone, twist the ring once and all of our rings will become warm, letting us know one of you is in trouble and needs help. I strongly urge you never to take it off.”

Harry paused and looked around at the expressions of shock, excitement and determination on the faces before him. Nodding to himself, he continued.

“Now Ron here,” he said pointing and smirking, “should be telling us about what we’re going to do. But, since he can’t talk in front of a crowd without shaking like a leaf, it’s going to be up to me. Our plan this year is to turn the DA into something more than just a fancy dueling club. We are going to borrow from the way the muggles fight because, believe it or not, they fight better than we do. They’ve learned the value of cooperating when fighting. We are going to form into groups called ‘squads’; each squad will have a leader that will oversee the operation of the squad. Ron will work with each squad leader to ensure they know what they need to do and each leader will work with their squad passing that information down to each of you.

Your squad is your family! They protect you and you protect them. You give them your best because they are willing to give you their best. Learn to work with one another. Learn to play with one another. Forget about which house you’re in. Houses keep us divided. If any of us hope to survive this war, we need to learn to lean on each other.

A squad will consist of ten people, one handling healing, three people shielding, five people casting offensive spells and the squad leader that can fit into any of the three roles. Hermione, Ginny and Luna will be teaching us all new offensive and defensive spells this year. You are not to use these spells in your DADA classes!" He waited until everyone nodded in understanding at this, then he continued.

"Neville will be teaching everyone healing spells and techniques. And I will float from group to group, helping where I can.

Everyone will learn the same set of spells. Based on your strengths and weaknesses, that will determine your position within the squad. Once the squads have learned to work as a team, then we'll turn to working as a group together."

As he spoke, the other five had been busy amongst themselves, breaking down the crowd into manageable groups. Hermione was taking notes of course.

"We've covered a lot of material tonight, and Ron still has some stuff, including your squad assignments. Please see Ron as soon as I'm done. If you have any questions, suggestions or ideas see Luna, Hermione or Ginny.

I know we can do this, and I know that if we can keep this to ourselves, Voldemort's Death Eaters are going to be in for one nasty shock when we go up against them. They won't know what hit them. But we'll know!" he said, fiercely. Scanning the room again, he nodded one last time.

"We'll meet again tomorrow night just after dinner," he finished.

The DA members walked over to Ron to get their squad assignments and reading material's he had prepared. Hermione handed out spell sheets covering the new spells they would be learning. A number of members came up to Harry to voice their support, and their thanks for being given a chance to make a difference. A number of them told him about friends and family they've already lost this past summer. Each report of loss hit Harry like a blow to his soul.

When only the six remained, the room transformed itself again, turning it into a cozy room with a fireplace and some couches and one lone armchair facing the fire. Harry took the armchair and stared moodily into the fire while the others looked at each other. The others took up positions on the couches and looked at Harry. Finally, in a low voice and with a bowed head, he began to talk.

"Justin told me about his little niece he lost this summer. She was only six years old. Hannah lost an older brother and his wife. Susan lost a cousin. Even Blaise lost a neighbor, including two kids, ages four and ten. The ten year old would have been sorted into a house by now. They shouldn't have to do this. They're just kids. They should be worried about snogging or grades or Quidditch. They have futures ahead of them, lives to live and loves to enjoy..." Harry tried to fight it but finally one shuddering sob broke through his control. In an instant Ginny was holding him and Hermione and Luna had their arms around him. Ginny spoke;

"Oh Harry, you feel every loss as if it were your own. They know why they do this and they know the risks. But everyone one of them also knows how much you care and would follow you anywhere. We all do it because we know how much you love and because we love you." Ginny wiped the tears from his face and gave him a smile. Harry calmed himself in that three-way embrace.

He leaned his forehead against Ginny's and took a couple of shuddering breaths. Then he pulled back and, with a wobbly smile, said, "I don't know what I'd do with out you, all of you." He looked each one of them in the eye. "You aren't just friends, your closer, more important, your family."

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### **Late Night Revelations...**

A few nights later, Harry woke from a sound sleep screaming, his hands clasped to his scar. The scar had been burning fitfully every couple of nights for weeks now. Fortunately for his dorm mates, he routine cast a silencing charm on his bed to prevent his screams from waking everyone. Usually it wasn't too bad, more annoying really. But tonight was a different story. Harry stumbled from his bed and headed into the bathroom, where he was promptly sick. He decided he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep for a while so he pulled on his robe and stumbled down to the common room. Maybe he could read for a while? He lurched over to one of the couches and sat down weakly, his limbs trembling. He closed his eyes and gasped as the scar flared again, tears forcing their way out from behind his eyelids. His awareness barely connected to his body. The link to what Voldemort was seeing and thinking was firmly closed off, but he couldn't block the pain.

Slowly he became aware of a pair of arms around him and a cool damp cloth pressed to the scar. He opened his eyes to see Ginny holding him and an anxious Hermione hovering nearby. He looked at Ginny. "He's killing people tonight personally Gin. Normally its not this bad but I can feel him killing." Ginny pulled his head to her breast and rocked him back and forth.

"Sleep Harry, just relax and let me hold you." Slowly but surely Harry's breathing slowed, becoming more regular and his trembling ceased. Hermione looked questioningly at Ginny.

"Should I get Madam Pomfrey, Ginny?"

The younger girl shook her head, "No, Madam Pomfrey has nothing for him that will help, short of a dreamless sleep potion, and he's been using too many of them lately. He's been trying to hide it from me, but I know his scar has been bothering him off and on for a while now. Why don't you go back to bed 'Mione? I'll stay with him."

Hermione conjured a large blanket and some pillows and covered the two of them. She walked to the girl's stairs, and then took one last look. Ginny was holding Harry, one arm around him, the other hand playing loosely with his hair. Harry was fast asleep and Ginny seemed not far behind him. Hermione smiled and told herself to set her alarm a little early so she could wake them before the others came down, then returned to her own bed, a little envious of Ginny. They might not be doing anything but sleeping, but it must be nice to sleep with the man you love.

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### **Passing Time...**

September slipped into October. Ron, the new Gryffindor Quidditch Captain had managed to convince Madam Hooch to start up a physical fitness club for the Quidditch teams, but within a few days a great number of students had joined the club and spent their first hour of the day jogging around the Quidditch field and running around the lake. Most of the members were DA



members, and the odd Quidditch player who didn't have a clue why the people running next to him were so motivated.

The DA met daily, and was starting to really shape up. Hermione's list of spells was growing slowly as people mastered them old ones. Ron drilled the squads, challenging them to excel. Ginny and Luna spent what time they could spare from homework and DA scouring the library for new possibilities. Harry's research into magical connections and bindings continued. He had managed to locate several volumes that Hermione had overlooked.

Ginny was somewhat frustrated. Harry would disappear for several hours each day, and then return to sit quietly with her while she worked on her homework. The couple managed to find some time to be alone, but not a lot and that didn't suit Ginny well. Ginny finally decided to find out where Harry was going every night. She knew he was sneaking out of the dorms. She could tell from his eyes that he wasn't sleeping well again and was afraid his nightmares had returned.

Finally unable to take anymore, she enlisted the aid of Hermione to help her find out where Harry was going. The two waited silently one night to see where Harry was running off too. Ginny kept Ron out of this loop because, prat that he was, when she first mentioned Harry sneaking out he joked that maybe he'd found some action on the side. Ginny had turned his hair blue for the whole day for that remark and even Hermione was seriously put out with her boyfriend.

The two waited for nearly an hour after Harry had left the tower before heading to the room of requirement. They were sure that was where he had gone. Both girls were using Harry's invisibility cloak, so they felt fairly safe that they wouldn't get caught on the way to the room. Opening the door just enough, they slipped in. Hermione clutched at Ginny and vice versa, trying to muffle their gasps.

Harry was barefoot and he had stripped down to nothing more than a pair of pants. His torso was covered in sweat, and his muscles rippled as he dodge six of his simulated opponents dressed as Death Eaters. His speed was incredible and what was most unnerving of all, he fought completely silently. It seemed to be some strange ballet of death. His eyes glowed with power as he cast spells with both his wand and his empty hand. He dodged spells, ducked, tumbled, and leapt out of the way. In a couple of instances, he seemed to blink, one moment here, the next moment a couple feet away, with no visible movement between the two locations. The speed of the spells being cast was almost too fast to see. These were no stinging spells like the DA practiced with; the cut on his arm with blood flowing down it gave mute testimony to that. The girls watched for only a minute or two when a rebounding spell hit just to the right of Hermione causing her to let out a small squeak.

Harry immediately deactivated his opponents and stared in the direction of the noise. His eyes narrowed and he started to chuckle, the glow fading from his eyes.

"You know Gin and 'Mione, I actually expected you two to figure it out sooner than this."

Ginny let the cloak slip to floor saying.

"You knew we were here?"

Harry looked sheepish and nodded affirmatively. "I heard the two of you when you were coming in. That's why I cast a shield in front of you, incase something rebounded in your direction."

Ginny looked at Harry's bare chest. He had muscle definition, not a lot; it was more like he was built for speed, not strength. Her face took on a hungry gleam. Hermione glanced at Ginny thinking, *oh Merlin I better do the talking for us both.*

"Harry, what do you think you were doing? Those are dangerous spells those things were using! Look at your arm. You're bleeding!" she said in exasperation. "Here, let me heal it." Before Hermione could move, Ginny dashed to his arm, wand out and started to heal it. Hermione was sure most healers didn't touch their patients quite as much as Ginny was touching his arm and shoulder.

"Hermione, you and I both know the DA is designed to handle Death Eaters, not Voldemort himself. That's my job and I have to prepare for it as well."

Hermione knew she couldn't fault that logic. The DA was set up to handle regular opponents, it was meant to clear the field so that Harry would be able to deal with Voldemort without any distractions. She was about to say just that when she spotted Ginny, who was running her hands over Harry's chest and back, a glazed look in her eye. Harry looked EXTREMELY nervous and he gave Hermione a look that said, "What do I do?"

Hermione chuckled then said "Ginny... Ginny? GINNY!"

Ginny's head whipped around to glare at Hermione and Hermione asked her calmly.

"What are you doing, Ginny dear?"

Ginny blushed from her toes to the roots of her hair. She became a solid mass of red, she said hopefully, "Umm... looking for more cuts to heal?"

Harry looked at the two of them slyly, "Would you like to return to the tower without getting caught?" He grinned with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Ginny grinned and grabbed the invisibility cloak from the floor.

"Each of you grab a feather when I'm aloft."

Harry transformed to Wings and when he felt the pull from two hands he flame-traveled to the Gryffindor Common room. Depositing the two girls to the floor, he changed back to his regular form. Strangely, he felt refreshed from that short trip. Saying good night to the girls, Harry waited 'til they had disappeared up the girl's stairway before he transformed back into Wings then flame-traveled above the castle.

*OH THE JOY OF IT!* Harry thought. He soared above the castle reveling in the ecstasy of flight. Harry screamed a song of pure delight as he dived and swooped. His eyes could spot the smallest rodent many hundreds of feet below him. The castle, the land of the Dark Forest, all came into sharp relief. Suddenly, next to Harry, another Phoenix appeared. Fawkes! Harry swooped around Fawkes and sang a song of welcome, much to the amusement of Fawkes. Harry faltered in the air, startled as a voice filled his head.

*"Welcome fledging. Come perch with me on the Astronomy tower."*

The two phoenixes glided down to land atop the top. Harry thought *Fawkes, is that really you?*

*“Yes, in this time and place I am Fawkes. I just wanted to thank you for Albus. He strayed perilously near the dark side and your refusal to perform as he wanted jerked him back to the light.”*

The voice sounded awful familiar to Harry, but he couldn't quite place it. As far as Albus Dumbledore was concerned he should be angry, but apparently anger was an emotion unknown to phoenixes. Finally, in frustration, he thought, *“I don't know what to do about Albus, Fawkes. I should be angry, but I can't be. He's hurt me so badly and tried to hurt me even more. I'd like to make peace with him, but I can't, not yet. Merlin knows I need his help, but first he needs to see me for what I am and not some tool he can use.”*

*“All will become clear in time fledging. Now is a time for you to spread your wings and enjoy what life brings to you. Albus and you will come to a peace in time, but both of you need to grow before that can happen. Your desire to make peace with him does you credit. But enough for tonight! Let us retire to our perches; tomorrow brings a new dawn and new things to experience for all. We will talk again fledging. Know that you have my thanks!”*

Fawkes vanished in a plume of fire; Harry followed right behind him, heading for his own bed and for once, a peaceful sleep.

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### **Picnic...**

The following morning was a Saturday and for the first time in weeks, Harry slept in. Ginny was surprised when he didn't show up at the morning run. Ron said that Harry was sleeping so soundly he didn't want to disturb him. When Harry still didn't show by the time she'd returned from breakfast, she became concerned. Walking up to the dorms, she found Harry lying on his bed, sleeping peacefully. She bent down and brushed her lips against his. Harry stirred slightly, so she tried it again. His eyes opened dreamily and he looked up at her.

“Hello love, did you sleep well?”

“That's a grand way to wake up Ginny, I might just throw out my alarm clock in favor of your method from here on. And yes, that was the best sleep I've had in a long time. I really think it had to do with my taking Wings form last night.”

She looked at him warmly; he looked rumpled from sleep, but much better than he had in a while. Then she smiled impishly, “Well get out of bed lazy bones, breakfast is long over and I've had Dobby prepare us a picnic lunch. Parvati told me about this wonderful spot down by the lake, nice and peaceful, and very private.” She stressed those last two words and gave him a suggestive look; inhaling deeply to enhance her assets and watching him eye those assets. Harry turned beet red and told her he'd need to shower first, but he'd meet her in the common room.

A short while later, the two were sitting near the shore of the lake, an outcropping of large rock hid the school from view. It was one of those perfect autumn days, sunny, not too chilly, but not too hot. Ginny was wearing a pretty floral print blouse that was unbuttoned a little too far down from the neck, and a matching skirt that seemed a little too short. Harry had trouble concentrating on the meal because the skirt kept hiking up her legs, showing him more and more.

Ginny laughed to herself and thought, *Boy he's really getting distracted. It's all part of my master plan Mr. Save-the-world Potter! I don't think you'll disapprove of my plan either Harry, but you're really an innocent. Well so am I, but I know how to push your buttons!*

Harry wasn't sure what Ginny had planned for today. But for some reason she kept giving him looks that were making him nervous. Almost as if she were stalking him as her next prey. As Ginny leaned over to Harry, her blouse pulled away from her body, the open buttons offering him a view he never saw before, and asked in a soft voice. "Am I making you nervous, Mr. Potter?" Harry tore his eyes away from the blouse with the wonderful internal view and nodded mutely.

*Now it's time to go for the kill, Mr. Super-Wizard. You might scare Tom Riddle, but you don't scare me. You're mine now!*

She leaned in closer and started to kiss Harry. Their kiss deepened with passion and she ran her hands up under his shirt. Harry's senses reeled. Incapable of rational thought, he first started to copy her hand movements as he held her. She dribbled kisses over his face, and then started on his neck. Harry's senses spun wildly and something seemed to ignite within him. He pulled her to him roughly and held her tight, kissing her like he was trying to drink her very essence. He felt like he couldn't get enough of her, his hands roaming under the back of her blouse. He kissed and nibbled along her neck and one hand slide around to her front, reveling in the sensual softness of her skin. His hand slid higher to cup her breast. Harry was in heaven; never had he felt anything so exquisite.

With a jerk, he suddenly realized exactly what he was touching. He let go of Ginny and backed quickly away, out of arms reach.

Ginny thumped to the soft grass and looked up both concerned and annoyed. Things had been going so well! Harry was sitting a few feet away looking at her fearfully and started to stammer.

"Gin... I didn't mean... don't be angry... I'm sorry..."

Ginny moved over to Harry and wrapped her arms around him. "Shhh Harry, its ok. I wanted you to touch me there."

He looked at her, surprised. She picked up one of his hands and placed it directly atop her breast and kissed him again. Again their passion started to spiral out of control. After what seemed an eternity Harry gasped. Grabbing Ginny's busy hands with his own, he held them tight. Looking down, he panted with the effort to calm his racing pulse. The blood flow problem wasn't helping matters either! Ginny whimpered and tried to move closer. "Wait Gin, give me a minute," Harry said, breathing heavily.

Once he'd regained control of his raging hormones, once his breathing returned to normal, he looked up at the beautiful young woman before him.

"Ginny, I want you so badly, I need you so much it hurts. But not like this. Please, I want our first time to be really special. I promise you it will happen, it's too important to both of us. But we need to do this right. Please?"

Ginny looked deeply into those emerald green eyes, hovering just inches away from her own, and could see the truth in them. He did want her, he did need her, but he wanted it to be just right.

Reluctantly she nodded and felt his joy as he pulled her into a hug. On one hand, she was annoyed, but on the other hand, she was pleased with his request. He was a man of honor and put hers even above his own.

Later, they sat next to each other, simply enjoying each other's company over a couple butterbeers. Ginny turned to Harry and asked, "Harry, do you ever think about the future?"

"I heard Ron and Hermione talking the other day about what they wanted to do. Ron talked about either being an Auror or maybe trying out for professional Quidditch. 'Mione talked about either being a teacher or an unspeakable and raising a family."

"But what about yourself Harry. What do you see for the future, for yourself?"

Harry looked down at the grass and said in a low voice.

"I don't know Gin. I'm not sure I'm allowed to have one. I have a dream of what I'd like, but like Dumbledore once told me in my first year, 'It does not do to dwell on dreams...' I have a sweet dream, but I try to forget about it, only I can't forget it."

Ginny looked at him and blinked. Then she stood up, placed her arms on her hips, and glared at him.

**"HARRY JAMES POTTER, IF YOU DON'T PLAN FOR A FUTURE YOU MIGHT AS WELL CALL TOM RIDDLE RIGHT NOW AND ASK HIM TO KILL YOU BECAUSE HE'S ALREADY WON! I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'D BE SO SELFISH! YOU DO HAVE A FUTURE HARRY JAMES POTTER AND IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, I'LL HEX YOU INTO NEXT WEEK!"**

Dripping with anger, she finished in a low, steely voice. "Do you honestly think I'd go out with a man that has no future?" Then she softened her tone, "Tell me your dream Harry."

Harry gave her a look that she had learned to call 'The embarrassed Harry'.

"I won't laugh at your dream Harry, I promise." She sat down next to him again and nudged him with her shoulder.

Harry looked down at the grass again and sighed. She reached over and pulled his chin so he was looking at her. Harry lost himself in her chocolate brown eyes, Ginny whispered, "Please tell me..."

Harry stared into her eyes and couldn't refuse her. In a whisper he said, "To spend my life with you; to fall asleep in your arms and wake up to your kiss. To have a home and a place where our children could grow up happy, like your family, a place where I can be Harry, not the Boy-Who-Lived..."

Ginny's eyes widened and she rocked backwards, looking at Harry. She had thought he'd talk about a job, like teaching or being an Auror, or maybe even Minister of Magic someday. She'd hoped he'd make room in there somewhere for her, but his dream shocked her to the core. His

dream didn't center on a career or a lifelong ambition. It centered on being loved by her and loving her back.

Harry looked at her nervously and muttered, "I guess it's a real silly drea..." Ginny stopped him mid-sentence by flinging herself on him and covering his face with kisses.

Ginny stopped kissing him long enough to say, "Its not silly Harry. Your dream sounds so sweet, and I want you to know Mr. Harry Potter, I intend to help you make that dream come true!"

It was only a day, and like so many good things in life, it ended much to soon. It was one of the best days of Harry's life. In the years to come, they would look back on that day with a fondness, for such days are more powerful than all the magic in the world.

### **Teacher Conferences...**

The first Hogsmeade visit was next Saturday, barely 2 weeks away. Autumn had turned chilly and the school was talking about the Halloween Ball in two weeks. Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were sitting at the table enjoying their breakfast when Professor Serena Snape stopped by the four of them and spoke.

"Miss Weasley, tonight your mother will be here at 6pm for a Parent-Teacher Conference. I expect you to join us in my private quarters at 7pm."

Ginny paled even further than anyone would have thought possible and nodded fearfully. Professor Snape moved to join the teacher's table thinking to herself, *"A little reflection on her past actions and performance in class won't hurt her. OH MERLIN! I'm getting as bad as Severus!"*

Harry, Ron and Hermione turned to the trembling Ginny. Hermione spoke up, "Ginny, you really have nothing to worry about! Your grades are nearly as good as mine were in that year and you've not ruined a single potion."

Ginny nodded her head rapidly. Harry shrugged and said, "Say the word Gin, and I'll kill her for you." Ron, Hermione and Ginny gaped at Harry. Grinning, he continued, "Hey, a teacher has got to be easier than your all powerful Dark Lord. Cheer up, Ginny. Things have been entirely too serious around here lately. This is a job for the Marauders! Pick your victim Gin, and we'll put together a prank that will put the twins to shame!"

Hermione frowned at this and muttered, "I'm not hearing this. I'm not hearing this! Ahhhh... there's Professor McGonagall, I need to speak to her about something." With that, she got up to talk to McGonagall at the teacher's table.

Ron shook his head saying, "You know I love that girl, but sometimes I think she's barking with less than a full set of fleas!" He blinked rapidly as it dawned on that he's just compared his girlfriend to a dog.

Ginny choked on her drink spraying Harry's left side with pumpkin juice. Harry looked at his robe and sighed. It seems that some times there really was no justice in the world.

Ginny, who'd started laughing, pulled her wand out of her pocket. And thus the world learned that casting the 'Scourgify' charm while giggling, turns the intended target bright yellow. Ron looked at Harry, goggling at him, and Ginny crammed her fist into her mouth, trying to calm the hysterical laughter gurgling in the back of her throat. Harry yanked out his wand.

"Finite Incantatum," he murmured, returning his robe to normal. He pointed his wand at Ginny and tried to look menacing at her.

"Do you want some of this?" He asked.

She stopped giggling and leaned up to whisper in his ear; "I'd rather play with your other wand!" Laughing, she caressed his cheek with one hand while Harry sat there, frozen to his seat, looking at her.

### **Professor McGonagall's Office...**

The professor sat, looking bemused, as one of her favorite students paced back in forth in front of her desk. Clearly she was concerned about something. Finally, Minerva cleared her throat and pierced her student with the patented McGonagall look, designed to strike fear in the hearts of all students.

"Miss Granger, I realize that something's gotten you upset, but I can not help you if you continue pacing back and forth, muttering to yourself."

"Oh I'm sorry Professor. The problem is...well this is just too weird for me to believe it, but I'm becoming convinced its true." Hermione stopped pacing and faced McGonagall. "Professor, I'm concerned about Harry."

"Harry? You refer to Mr. Potter, I presume? What sort of trouble has he gotten himself into this time? Or are we talking about something else? I thought Miss Weasley was overseeing his ahem... romantic interests."

"Oh no Professor, its nothing like that," she stammered. "It's just that I've begun to notice a few things about Harry that have struck me as...well, odd."

Professor McGonagall leaned forward with a sense of foreboding and motioned for her to continue.

"Are you aware that Harry does not know what a noble metal is Professor? And he apparently is unaware that it's supposed to be impossible to conjure gemstones, let alone precious gems. Professor, I have a theory about this, but I need help in proving it."

Harry would suspect me if I asked him to try this, but he'd go along with this from you Professor. He respects you and sees you as a trustable authority figure. All I ask is that you give him a piece of metal and tell him to try this incantation. 'Combufo Fonticulus'. Tell him it will produce a small fountain of fire in the midst of the metal object you gave him."

"Really Miss Granger... Combufo Fonticulus? Burning Fountain, if I remember my Latin properly. But this isn't a real spell Miss Granger. Nothing will happen."

“That’s quite true for you and I Professor, but Harry doesn’t know that.”

“You mean...”

“I think so Professor. I wasn’t sure of it before, but now I’m convinced it’s true.”

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### **Later that Day, Transfiguration Class...**

The class was still split. Another three students joined the original six who had opted not to test for their animagus form because they couldn’t transform at all. While the larger group studied the process and the laws governing wizards who transform, the smaller group concentrated on conjuring metal objects and molding them to the desired form. In the past few weeks they had made buttons, flatware of all types, pots, pans, even cauldrons.

To be honest, Harry was beginning to get bored. He was consistently conjuring objects, then adding artistic designs to them. Over the course of a few days, he’d conjured up a setting of flatware for twelve and inlaid the flatware with the crest of Gryffindor. McGonagall was so impressed, he earned ten points for his house and she said she’d keep the set to use at teacher meetings. This was a clear indication of her desire to annoy the Slytherin Head of House.

“Mr. Potter, may I see you up here for a moment?”

Harry got up and walked to McGonagall’s desk.

“Yes Professor?”

“I’d like you to try something for me, Mr. Potter. I found an old spell that creates a pillar of fire from a block of metal. I thought it might be useful for heating some of the metals you’ve been using, making them softer. Simply point your wand at the metal block on my desk and use the incantation ‘Combufo Fonticulus’.”

*This could be useful*, Harry thought. He looked at the block McGonagall had provided; it appeared to be a piece of regular iron, about the size of a small book.

Harry pulled out his wand and murmured, “Combufo Fonticulus” over the block of metal. The metal seemed to glow briefly, and then a small jet of flame appeared, coming from the center of the block of metal. The flame shot up a good six inches, burning an intense blue white. Waves of heat radiated from the pillar. Both McGonagall and Harry stepped back. McGonagall looked at Harry and said, “Very good Mr. Potter, quite impressive really. Now, let’s see if you can turn it off with a ‘finite incantatem’.”

Harry pointed his wand at the pillar and cast the spell. The pillar flared once and extinguished itself. McGonagall eyed Harry carefully, looking for signs of fatigue or stress.

“Tell me Mr. Potter, how do you feel after doing that?”

“I’m fine Professor. I don’t think I’d want to make a bigger fountain though. That was harder than it looked.”



“Very well Mr. Potter, you may return to your seat. If you need to, rest for a bit before resuming your lesson.”

“Yes, Professor.”

As Harry returned to his seat, Professor McGonagall caught Hermione’s eye. She nodded to the young woman and returned to the task of teaching her class.

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### **Slytherin Private quarters, that evening...**

Serena Snape glanced up at the clock on the living room wall. Molly Weasley was due in a few minutes, and Serena was feeling nervous. This meeting was more important than grades, or behavior. A boy’s sense of self-worth was on the line, and Serena desperately needed help if her plan had any hope of succeeding.

After making sure the tea service was in place, she tossed her hair over her shoulder and once again straightened her light green sundress. She fidgeted slightly, attempting to make the hem hang just so.

“Now this is something I never thought I’d see,” said an amused voice from the doorway.

Serena whipped around and glared at the man leaning against the door jam. “What?” She asked, suspicious of the half smile on Severus’ face.

“The woman who can brew an immolation potion, grade papers, and give a lecture on the addictive ingredients of a Dreamless Sleep Potion to a room of fourth years, all at the same time, finds herself nervous at the thought of talking to a student and her mother? Amazing,” he drawled, pushing himself away from the door and walking towards her. “I never thought I’d see the day...”

“Shut it, Severus. I’m not in the mood for your humor tonight,” she scowled at him. “You know what’s at stake. You know why I’m meeting with Molly and Ginny Weasley.”

Snape wrapped his arms around his wife and looked down at her with a sigh. “Yes, I do know. I just don’t see the need for nerves. They certainly won’t help matters. Besides, Molly Weasley has thought of the boy as one of her own for many years. Thanks to the Ministry’s involvement, he IS one of her own now. The only thing you have to remember about Molly is, she’ll go to hell and back for one of her children, and Harry is now, officially hers. Think of her as a mother lion, protecting her cubs. She’ll help you, Serena. Relax.”

Serena laid her head against her husband’s chest. “True. And there’s no question of Ginny’s willingness to help. That girl would have herself magically connected to the boy’s hip, if given half the chance!”

“Connected at the hip? No, somewhere more...interesting, if I don’t miss my guess.”

Serena slapped his arm. “Severus, behave!”

“But I thought you like it when I was ...”

Serena slapped her hand over his mouth to shut him up and glared. “That’s it, I think it’s time for you to leave. Don’t you have papers to grade or something?”

Severus bit her palm, kissed it, and then removed it from his mouth. “Sadly, yes. As much as I’d love to stay and listen, I don’t think I could put up with a night of ‘girl talk’. I’ll be in the library when you’re done.” Giving her hand one last squeeze, he walked out of the room.

*That man, she thought to herself. One of these days I’m going to...*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. Taking a cleansing breath, she walked out to the entry hall and opened the door. Standing before her was short woman, with a very motherly figure. The red hair, so typically Weasley, was in a tidy twist at the nape of her neck.

“Mrs. Weasley? It’s so nice to meet! I’m Serena Snape.”

“Professor Snape, it’s good to meet you at last. Ginny sent us an owl about her new Potion Mistress of course, but it’s so nice to finally be able to speak with you. Although, I wish it could be under better circumstances.”

Serena stared at the woman for a moment, before remember her manners and inviting her in. Once settled in the living room, the tea poured, Serena asked, “You mentioned something about ‘better circumstances’?”

“Well, yes. I’m assuming one of my children have done something to warrant this meeting. So which of the three darlings am I going to be shrieking at tonight, Professor Snape?”

“Three?” Serena asked, trying not to smile.

“Ron, Harry or Ginny,” Mrs. Weasley said, with a roll of her eyes. “I swear those three are almost as bad as the twins. Not with pranks so much, mind you. But if there’s trouble to be found, one or all of those three, along with Miss Granger of course, will find it!”

Serena couldn’t help herself. She started to laugh quietly. *She already thinks of Harry as one of hers, she thought. Severus was right, drat that man. Just once I’d like him to be wrong. Not in this, of course, but...* She was brought back to the present conversation when Mrs. Weasley started speaking once again.

“I’m not sure which one did it, or even what they did, but I assure you Professor, Arthur and I take these things very seriously.”

Smiling, Serena said, “I’m afraid you’ve come here with a slight misconception, Mrs. Weasley. None of your children have done anything wrong. Actually, I find all three of them bright, capable students.”

Putting her teacup down, Molly asked, puzzled, “Then I’m afraid I’m at a loss. Why am I here, Professor?”

“First, please call me Serena, if you don’t mind. I’ve always hated formalities.”

“Of course. Please call me Molly. But Prof...Serena, I’m afraid I still don’t understand.”

Frowning into her teacup, Serena thought to herself, *here goes nothing*.

“Molly, I’ve asked you here to discuss Harry. No, no, he’s done nothing wrong,” she added quickly, as Molly stiffened and sat up on the edge of the couch cushion. “It’s more in the manner of how we can help him.”

“Help him? What’s wrong? What’s happened? Is he all right?” Molly asked, beginning to panic. *Merlin! What now? That child has been through enough!*

“Molly, please. Nothing’s wrong. I’m sure Harry is in the Gryffindor common room right now, doing his homework, or playing wizards chess with Ron. No, what I want to discuss is Harry’s self esteem.

I don’t know all of Harry’s past. I know some of what happened when he lived with his aunt and uncle. And I know what happened to him just before he came to Hogwarts this year. Severus was in the infirmary when Harry arrived, and told me what followed. Mrs. Weasley...Molly, have you noticed how...fragile Harry’s sense of self worth is?”

Molly sat back. Frowning, she said, “Yes, Arthur and I have discussed this over the years. Harry is a hard one to figure out sometimes. Push him on something and he’ll dig his heels in faster than you can spit. We thought, if we could just get him to talk to us, to someone, about what was happening to him on Privet Drive, it would help. But he won’t. The walls that boy’s built over the years come up fast and he shuts down. Hermione said once that she felt like Harry thought he deserved what his aunt and uncle did to him. Damn those wretched people,” Molly exclaimed fiercely.

Setting her teacup on the coffee table, Serena turned to Molly. “This is why I’ve asked you here, Molly. We need to find a way to help him. Harry is a bit of an enigma. What he’s suffered through should have produced a young man who is distrustful of all those around him, with no sense of what it is to love anyone else.”

“Voldemort...” Molly whispered, then flinched when she realized what she just said.

“Yes, exactly! Instead, we have a respectful, moral, trusting young man, willing to help anyone in need. He also has an incredible willingness to love, and a *need* to be loved in return. However, with his low self esteem, and all that’s come before with Cedric and his godfather, he feels he doesn’t deserve to be loved, or trusted.”

“Harry knows that we love him. The children have thought of him as a member of the family since his second year. Well, perhaps not Ginny, but...”

“While I’m sure that’s true,” Serene interrupted, “do you believe that Harry has accepted your feelings for him? And what would happen if he were rejected by your family?”

Molly reared up off the couch, incensed. “How *dare* you suggest we would ever turn our backs on Harry! We love that boy! He’s like our son. He IS our son!”

As the woman continued her rant, Serena thought to herself, *Mother lion indeed; ten points to Slytherin, Severus. You were right once again, damn you...* Smiling at the thought, she coughed suddenly when she realized Molly had wound down, and was now glaring daggers at her.

“Molly, I was not suggesting your family would ever turn their backs on Harry. I was trying to think like a boy who feels he doesn’t deserve it. As I said, Harry is an enigma. Trying to figure out what that young man is thinking or feeling is difficult. I apologize for any insult I may have inadvertently given you or Arthur.”

Molly grimaced and sat back down with a sigh. “No, no. I’m sorry if I overreacted. You’re right. Harry is a hard one to figure out. Arthur and I have wanted nothing more than to bring the boy into our home, into our family for years. He needs a stable home environment, a family’s love. He needs normalcy in his life, something he’s never had. The problem is getting him to realize that he *deserves* these things, and to accept them when they’re given.”

“Self confidence,” murmured Serena.

“Simply put, yes,” Molly replied. “But how? Harry doesn’t take compliments well. He gets embarrassed when I fuss over him or give him praise.”

“But that’s just what he needs, embarrassed or not. We need to help him build his sense of self worth, Molly. I can do some of that in the classroom, but you and Arthur, as his parents, will be in a position to help the most.”

Noticing the tears in Molly’s eyes, Serena leaned over and took a few tissues from a box on the coffee table and handed them to the weeping woman with concern. “Have I said something to upset you, Molly?”

“No, no...it’s just...his parents. The paperwork is complete of course, but no one’s ever called us his parents before,” she said, mopping her face and smiling.

Nodding her understanding, Serena picked up her teacup and took a sip while the woman next to her collected herself.

“So, Arthur and I will do what we can as his parents. Perhaps we should speak to Hermione as well. My Ron, well, he’s not the most sensitive person. But Hermione is. And Ginny. Ginny will help of course.”

“Yes, Ginny. That’s something else I wished to speak to you about...”

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### **Gryffindor Common Room...**

Ginny sat at a table in the common room, trying to finish her Herbology homework; one foot of parchment on how to eradicate Puss Beetles from the Stink Sap plant. *Honestly*, thought Ginny, *who cares? Let the nasty little buggers have the plant. Sure, it’s pretty, but the smell! Hmm, I*

*wonder if Hermione would consider starting a campaign to save the Puss Beetle? Not that it would get me out of this homework assignment!*

Sighing, she shoved the parchment away in frustration and glanced at the clock. *Almost time*, she thought, as a pair of hands came down on her shoulders, gently.

“Relax Gin,” Harry said softly in her ear, sending shivers down her spine. “It won’t be that bad. The most they’ll do is yell at you and maybe give you detention. If it were really serious, you’d be going to the Headmasters office, not Professor Snape’s quarters.”

Ginny leaned back against him, taking comfort from his warmth. “I know. I just hate not knowing why I’m being called down there.”

Taking her hand, Harry pulled her out of her seat and turned her to face him. “Gin, relax,” he repeated. “It’ll be ok. I’ll wait up for you and we’ll talk about it when you get back. But you better get going. Professor Snape may be nicer than her husband, but I don’t think she’d be real happy with you if you were late.”

“Gee, thanks Harry! You sure know just what to say to a girl to make her feel better,” Ginny huffed.

Laughing, Harry bent down, touched his forehead to hers and whispered, “I’ll think of something to cheer you up when you get back.” He then kissed her gently, sweetly, on the mouth, while Ron made retching noises in the background where he was playing chess with Dean.

“Well, if it’s more of *that*, this will be the fastest parent/teacher conference in the history of Hogwarts,” Ginny said with a grin, before heading for the portrait hole.

On her way to the dungeon and Professor Snape’s quarters, Ginny’s nervousness came back in a rush. *I hate this. Called to a conference and having no idea what it’s about would drive anyone mad. Maybe that’s the point. Maybe Serena Snape is more like her husband than anyone thought. This would be something he’d do, slimy git that he is. Oh Merlin, what if they found out about the dung bomb I dropped from the third floor stairwell last Monday? No, no, it can’t be that. No one saw me. Maybe it was the invisible ink I added to the pumpkin juice at the Slytherin table on Wednesday morning. No, it can’t be that either. The affects didn’t show up for over an hour. And honestly, it’s not like black stained teeth every hurt anyone!*

Ginny was startled from her reverie when she found herself at Professor Snape’s door. She knocked, very softly. *Maybe she won’t answer. She can’t answer if she doesn’t hear me. ‘I’m sorry Professor. I did knock, but no one answered.’ Yes, that could work. I’ll just say...*

The door opened and Ginny jumped back with a small squeak. *So much for that idea*, Ginny thought as she looked up into the glaring eyes of Severus Snape.

“Miss Weasley,” Severus drawled, noticing the girl’s nervousness. “Your mother and Professor Snape are in the living room. If you’ll follow me?”

Following the Professor's instructions, she entered the hallway as he closed the door. Trailing after him, she entered the living room to find her mother and Serena Snape sitting on the couch, drinking tea.

"Ginny darling," her mother cried as she stood up and walked around the couch to hug her. "It's so nice to see you. Severus, thank you for escorting her in."

"Of course, Molly. If you'll excuse me?" Noticing the woman wasn't paying any attention to him as she seated her daughter on the couch and served her tea, he glanced at his wife, one eyebrow raised.

Serena gave him a wink, before waving her hands in a shooing motion. Rolling his eyes, he turned and left the room. *Dismissed like a house-elf*, Severus thought. *Women! I mean, honestly...*

Serena tried not to laugh at the put upon expression that crossed her husband's face before he turned away. *He's a good man, but he really needs to lighten up sometimes.*

Turning back to her guests, she saw that Ginny had been seated and served by her mother. Taking the chair across from the couch, Serena sat and waited patiently for mother and daughter to get caught up.

*Ginny could be the lynch pin in this whole plan*, Serena thought. *The girl's obviously crazy for Harry. I know she'll want to help. She may even have a few ideas about how to approach the problem. He's probably closer to her than anyone. Well, maybe. They haven't been going out that long...*

"Um, Professor?"

Blinking, she glanced over at the young red head and smiled. "Hello, Ginny. I'm sure you're wondering why I've asked you here."

"Yes, Professor. Worried, actually. I haven't done anything wrong, well ok there was those dung bombs, but still Professor. Honestly. I really like potions now. You're a great teacher, much better than..." Ginny stopped, horrified at what she'd just said. "I'm sorry, Professor, I didn't mean..."

Serena laughed, interrupting Ginny's rambling apology. "My dear girl, you've nothing to apologize for. Of *course* I'm a better teacher than Severus," she added, noting the shadow of her husband in the doorway. *Revenge is sweet, husband! As you are about to learn, you sneaky Slytherin!* "I mean really, who wouldn't be? He's dark, broody, and just so *Slytherin!* Always sneaking around, spying on people..." She stopped as a rude noise came from the doorway. "Would you like to join us, Severus? Or would you rather continue to lurk in dark corners as usual," she called out with a wink towards the Weasley women.

"I'll speak to you later, *wife*," Severus said menacingly from the doorway, before stalking away.

Serena grinned knowingly at the two women. "The training process is slow, but I have great hopes for that man," she said as Molly laughed. Ginny snickered.

“Well, now that the Slytherin’s been taken care of, why don’t we put Ginny out of her agony and explain why she’s here.” Serena looked Ginny in the eye and said, “It’s about Harry, Ginny. We need your help.”

Ginny stiffened. Harry had told her about his ‘talk’ with Dumbledore. Now a teacher was wanted to talk about him? Did the Headmaster have anything to do with this? Was he trying to use Ginny to get to Harry again?

“I’m sorry Professor. If this has anything to do with what happened between the Headmaster and Harry, I won’t help you. I love Harry, and I will *not* allow you, Dumbledore or anyone else to hurt him!”

“Ah yes. I’d forgotten about that. Severus told me what took place in Dumbledore’s office.” *This could be a problem.*

“What’s this? Something’s happened between Dumbledore and Harry?” Molly asked, concerned.

Still staring at her Professor with hostility, Ginny said, “I’ll explain later Mum. If that’s all Professor, I still have homework to complete tonight.”

“No Ginny, I’m afraid that’s not all,” Serena said, a hint of steel in her voice. “What happened between the Headmaster and Harry is between them. For what it’s worth, I believe Harry was entirely correct in what he said to the Headmaster. However, that is not what your mother and I wish to discuss with you.”

Ginny tilted her head and stared her professor, thinking. “Alright,” she said a few moments later. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Ginny darling,” her mother said, gaining her attention. “I’m sure you’ve noticed Harry’s self esteem issues.”

Serena flinched inwardly. *All the finesse of a steam roller there, Molly, she thought. It might have been better to...*

“Of course,” Ginny replied in the equivalent of a verbal shrug. “Anyone who knows Harry realizes that except for Harry himself. I’m trying to work on it though. Why?”

As Molly explained the problem to her daughter, Serena relaxed in her chair. Obviously the woman knew how best to address the issue with her child. As she continued to listen to the young girl and her mother speak, throwing in a comment herself from time to time, she began to realize that this just might work.

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### **Ginny’s revelations...**

Thirty minutes later, the discussion of self-esteem and how best to help the green-eyed lad was winding down. Serena was pouring more tea into her cup when Ginny’s response to her mother’s last question nearly made her drop teapot.

“That would NEVER happen,” Ginny yelled furiously, leaping to her feet. “I can’t believe you would even THINK that Mother! Harry, the next Voldemort? Are you insane?” She shrieked.

“Ginny! Calm down and listen to me!” her mother said loudly. “With everything that Harry’s been through, it would be easy for him to...”

“Easy? You’ve gone mental!” Ginny started to pace. “Voldemort *killed* his parents, Mother! He’s fought Voldemort four times and despises everything that...that...THING stands for! He can’t stand to see anyone get hurt. Do you honestly believe he’d be able to kill someone? Barking, you are!”

“Ginerva Weasley! You will not speak to me in such a way, young lady!” her mother said heatedly. “You will sit down and listen to me.”

“No mum, I won’t! You don’t understand,” she said. “But then, you wouldn’t know would you,” she muttered to herself. “I can’t tell you, but you need to know. I promised...I think I did. Oh, I don’t know!” She stopped pacing and stared at her mother, scowling.

“Ginny, what is it,” Serena asked gently.

Ginny jumped and whirled around, having forgotten all about her professor. *Oh Merlin! If they really think Harry capable of something like that; Harry, the next Voldemort? They have to know, but...Oh Merlin. Harry, forgive me!*

“I have to tell you both something. I don’t want to, but I have to. So, you’re both going to swear a witch’s oath that you will NEVER reveal what I’m about to tell you. Will you do that?” Ginny asked, sternly.

“Ginny, I hardly think that’s necessary,” her mother began.

“It is mum. Very. And if you can’t give me that oath, then I’m not going to tell you one more bloody thing!”

“Ginerva! Language!” her mother admonished.

“I mean it mum. That goes for you too, Professor!” Ginny said, surly.

Serena eyed the young woman before her with interest. *This one is fierce in her loyalty. All the better for Harry.*

Making a decision, Serena stood and pulled out her wand. Casting a silencing charm on the door, she turned to Ginny. “I give you my oath as a witch, not to reveal what you say from this point, until the charm is removed from the door.” Then she placed her wand on the table in plain sight.

Ginny nodded then turned to her mother, one eyebrow raised.

Molly huffed, but repeated the oath, word for word.



Ginny sighed in relief, and then rubbed her forehead. "Alright. Harry wouldn't...no, *cannot* become like Voldemort. He simply cannot turn from the light. He is incapable of it," She said with conviction.

The two women were startled by the girl's certainty, but both were still unsure.

"Ginny, I know that loving someone means seeing only what's best and good in that person," Serena began.

Ginny snorted. "You obviously don't know Harry. A more stubborn, hard headed, clumsy...I mean honesty, you should have seen him when he accidentally touched one of my breasts down at the snogging place at the lake. I mean..." Ginny stopped in shock, staring at her mother. "Umm, I didn't mean to say that. Really mum, it was an accident. I mean, not that we were there, but that he...I mean, we weren't doing anything...well, we were, but it was just kissing...really, mum, we didn't...it was just KISSING," she ended, desperately.

Molly, who'd turned an alarming shade of red by this point, opened her mouth, but Serena cut in.

"Molly, we'll get back to that. But right now, I think we need to come back to the topic at hand."

Molly looked mutinous for a moment, before finally nodding. "We'll discuss this in a bit, young lady. Now, if you don't mind?"

"Mind? Mind what," Ginny asked in confusion, eyeing her mother warily.

"The silencing charm was put up for a reason Ginny. Remember?" Serena asked gently, heading off Molly's temper.

"What? Oh yeah. Umm..."

"You were telling us why Harry could never be like Voldemort," Serena said, trying not to grin.

"Right. Yes. Harry could never be like Voldemort," Ginny parroted, still staring at her mother.

Sighing, Serena walked over to Ginny and turned her away from her mother. Tilting the girl's head up, she looked into her brown eyes. "Ginny, with everything that's happened to Harry over the years, it wouldn't take much to send him over the edge. With his poor sense of self worth..."

"No, it just can't happen," Ginny said softly, finally refocused.

"Why?" Serena asked, just as softly.

"His animagus form won't allow for it, Professor."

Serena was shocked. *Animagus?*

"His what, dear?" Molly asked.

“His animagus mum. He practiced it over the summer. Right good he is too. He’s got it down perfectly now.”

“Being an animagus does not preclude one from being evil, Ginny,” Serena said calmly.

“That would depend on what form a person took, Professor.”

“True enough.” Serena replied. “But that would mean transforming into a magical creature and that’s exceedingly rare. There hasn’t been one in ages,” she continued, almost to herself. Starting to pace, she continued. “But a form that would preclude evil? That would have to be something like a Unicorn or a...” She stopped and whirled around to stare at Ginny in disbelief.

“Or a Phoenix,” Ginny said simply.

Serena felt her jaw drop, but for the life of her, could do nothing about it. *A Phoenix? Bloody hell! No wonder Ginny was so certain! And that would certainly explain the ring Harry made. This meant...*

Closing her mouth, she glanced over at Molly, who sat in stunned disbelief. “You’re right Ginny,” she said quietly, turning back to the girl and, for the first time, noticing the ring on her finger. Taking Ginny’s hand and passing a finger over the ring, she smiled. “Harry cannot become evil.”

“Harry has a lot of problems, Professor. But being evil isn’t one of them,” Ginny said, impishly. Turning towards her mother, she grinned. “Oh snap out of it, mum. Harry’s safe for now. His animagus won’t allow him to be the next Voldemort. I’d think you’d be happy about that, not gob smacked!”

Molly sighed and rubbed her eyes tiredly, mumbling, “An animagus in the family. An animagus. Unregistered to boot. Merlin.” Looking up at her daughter’s impish face, she huffed. “Well, at least he didn’t become a dog! The cat would go bonkers!”

Ginny burst out laughing, while her mother looked a bit sheepish. Serena just looked puzzled.

“Family joke dear,” Molly said to Serena. “With this new information, I certainly feel better,” she continued, changing the subject. “I don’t think we have to worry about Harry turning away from the light, Serena.”

“No, thankfully. Thank you for telling us Ginny. It’s a relief.”

Ginny shrugged. “I only ask that you keep your oaths.”

Both women nodded.

“Now Ginny dear. I believe there was something mentioned about a ‘snogging place’? Perhaps we should be discussing a new topic, hmm?” Ginny cringed.

Molly started to say something and Ginny cut her off. “Mum you really have nothing to worry about. I tried very hard with Harry, but he... he...” She sighed and kicked herself mentally.

“We were out in a place Parvati told me about. It’s secluded and the school’s hidden by a large rock. We started kissing. Harry touched me accidentally and was so afraid and scared I would be angry with him, he jumped away like I was going to hex him. He was in tears, begging me not to be angry.

When I tried to convince him it was ok, he still wouldn’t go any further than kissing. I tried very hard mum, and maybe I should be ashamed of myself, but I’m not. At first I was a little hurt, but he said he wanted our first time to be special, to be perfect. It still hurts a little, but I think I understand what he was trying to tell me. I know he wanted me, I could see him fighting with himself over it.

So instead we sat there and talked. I ended up yelling at him because he told me he wouldn’t make any plans about his future. He said he had a sweet dream, but he didn’t believe in it, partly because of what Dumbledore once told him. How did he put it? He said Dumbledore said to him ‘It does not do to dwell on dreams.’ Oh Merlin, he’s taken so much from Harry!”

Ginny was sobbing at this point but she continued.

“I pressed him about his dream and he finally admitted he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me, raise children, have a loving family like we have, he said. But for him, it’s a dream only, something he doesn’t think will happen because of who he is and what he has to do.”

Ginny wound down and looked at her mother, her eyes pleading that she tell her everything would work out ok. Molly looked at her daughter for a moment, her own eyes brimming over.

“Ginny dear, that boy is a keeper. Even I can see he cares very much for you. And now that I know about the animagus issue, it explains how you two managed to grow so close over the summer, despite his being locked up with those awful muggles. I can’t say I’m pleased that you’re so willing to give yourself away like that, but I shouldn’t be one to cast blame. I was your age when I decided your father was the one for me.”

She grinned sheepishly and said, “It might have been nice if Arthur had shown the same restraint.”

Molly paused for a moment, thinking. “Ginny, I just want you to promise me one thing. I don’t expect you to keep your hands to yourself, but I do ask that you take all the precautions necessary to insure you don’t make me a grandmother until you’ve at least graduated. Merlin knows I love Harry like my own sons, and would dearly love to see the two of you together, but I’m too young to be a grandmother yet. My advice would be to go very slowly with him. He’s not like other boys you’ve dated.”

Serena frowned and interrupted Molly before she could continue. “Ginny, I’m curious. Are you saying Harry doesn’t believe he has a future?”

Ginny nodded.

“I told him to knock off that kind of talk and I intended to make sure his dream came true, but I’m not sure he really believes it.”

Serena asked quietly, “Do you know why he believes this?”

Ginny nodded in affirmation, then said, “I’m sorry that I can’t tell you, even with the oath. It’s a secret and Harry would never forgive me. All I’ll say is, he tells me that I’m the reason he even has a chance at a future.”

“Well Ginny, I guess you’ll have to convince him there is always a reason for hope. Who knows, you might even be able to wear the lad down. I have to admit that, hearing of a 16 year old boy with that kind of restraint seems unnatural. At the very least, you’ll force him to take many cold showers. I can’t say I’m entirely happy with what I’ve heard, but I am reassured.

“Ginny, is Harry waiting for you back in your common room?”

Ginny nodded worriedly.

“Alright, let’s give him an excuse for this meeting. How about an hours worth of detention tomorrow, here in my quarters, for those dung bombs of yours? We’ll have some tea and talk about how our iron willed Mr. Potter might find his will eroded. After all, I tamed the ominous Severus Snape, I might have some advice as to wearing down Harry Potter’s resolve.” Molly chuckled, and Ginny glanced down at her feet.

Molly and Ginny stood up and thanked Serena for her time, then exited the apartment. They hugged before Ginny left for her common room. As Molly left Hogwarts wards, she took a deep breath, blew out the air from her lungs, and apparated back to The Burrow with a ‘Pop’.

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## Chapter 5 Snapes Story.

### At the burrow...

Molly and Arthur Weasley sat down for dinner. With the last of their children gone off to Hogwarts, the Burrow seemed so empty and quiet. They both looked up when they heard a scratching at the window. Arthur opened the window and Hedwig flew in, landing on the table next near Molly.

“That’s Harry’s owl! I hope nothing’s wrong.” She quickly removed the letter while Arthur got a bowl of water and a few owl treats for her. Hedwig had a drink and a few treats then flew out the window.

Molly opened the letter and started to read it. As she read, a single tear ran down her cheek. Alarmed, Arthur leaned closer. “Molly what’s wrong, is there a problem?”

“No... no problem dear. But some of our own children could take lessons from Harry in how to write letters,” she replied, handing him the letter.

*Dear Mum and Dad,*

*Boy does that sound strange to me. I’m not sure what to call you two now. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley?*

*Mum and Dad? Aunt and Uncle? No, never that I think. I'm sure we'll figure it out when we meet over the holiday break.*

*Classes seem to be going fine; so far I'm doing well in most of them. Professor McGonagall seems most pleased with my conjurations. I made a flatware setting with the Gryffindor crest engraved on them for her. She was really happy about that. The rest of my classes seem to be going well also. I think there is something wrong with Professor Snape though. He hasn't taken a single point from me this year. Oh, he still sneers and such and looms over people, but he seems to have mellowed an awful lot!*

*Ron is doing great! He's really picking up on being one of the best keepers Gryffindor has seen in a long time. The other day at practice Ron glanced over at 'Mione in the stands and nearly got knocked off his broom by a quaffle. So if he writes telling you about his black eye, that's how he REALLY got it. If I know Ron, he'll say it came from some Slytherin while he was defending his honor.*

*Ginny is doing swell! She's got a lot of homework because it's an OWL year, but Hermione and myself have been helping her where we can. She's really fantastic and very pretty! But I figure you already know that.*

*Ginny is part of the reason why I'm writing this letter today. It's sort of embarrassing and I'm reluctant to bring this up at all, but there are two favors I'd really like to ask of you.*

*The first favor is, would it be possible for me to invite three people to dinner at Christmas? Remus and Tonks are practically family to me, and I have a good friend that Remus could bring along who is a squib. He's the man I worked for over last summer and he was really nice to me. He's living here in England, all alone, and it just doesn't seem right that he should spend the holiday by himself. I hope you'll say yes, but I also promise I won't write Remus about the holidays 'til I hear back from you.*

*The second favor is harder for me to ask and I'm really reluctant to even bring this up. I hope you won't get mad at me. Next weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend; the one following that will have a Halloween ball. The professors have also announced they will have a Yule ball this year. I'd really like to buy Ginny, Ron and 'Mione new dress robes this year, but I know Ron, he'd throw a fit, call it charity and hate me forever for it. I've written Remus about this, and if you'll agree, he'll transfer some galleons into your account and you can give them the money. I'd like Ginny to have something really pretty and special this year, she deserves it. You don't have to say where the money came from. This is something special I want to do for her and Ron and 'Mione. Please don't misunderstand me; this is just something I want to do for my family. If you agree with this, floo Remus and let him know.*

*I hope you're both well and I can't wait 'til the holidays to come home.*

*Your Loving son(?),  
Harry*

The two shared a look that only a husband and wife of many years can share. Arthur cleared his throat and said, "I see what you mean. Even Percy and Ginny's letters were never that long. And as for this money question, I can't say I've ever heard about a boy writing home asking for permission to give his family money. Maybe I had better floo Remus and find out what this is all

about?" Molly nodded and set about clearing the dishes off the table while Arthur walked into the living room to find Remus Lupin.

Ten minutes later, she was sitting at the table rereading Harry's letter when Arthur came back into the kitchen with a bemused look on his face.

"Dear? What did Remus have to say?" She asked.

"Molly, did you know that when Harry comes of age, he'll be among the richest, most eligible wizard bachelors in the country? Remus said he talked with Harry and had to convince Harry that a more reasonable amount was better than his first suggestion. He originally wanted to transfer a half million galleons into our account! Remus told him really expensive dress robes for four people wouldn't run more than 500 galleons. I told Remus to go ahead with the transfer and we'd see the kids get the money this week. Remus told me not to bother sending any to Harry since he could just charge it to his vaults. VAULTS!"

Molly looked worried for a moment, and then she smiled broadly saying; "Seems our Ginny has really picked a good one."

Arthur blinked at her in confusion, then started to chuckle. "Yeah, she always said she was going to find herself a prince. I guess she has at that." Frowning slightly, Arthur continued. "Molly, what do we do if he offers that kind of money to us again?"

"We'll accept it because he's giving it to us out of love Arthur. He's not trying to buy us; it's just the way Harry is. You read the letter. Harry thinks of us as his family. We accept it and live like we always do. Money doesn't change who and what we are Arthur."

Arthur nodded and suddenly his face paled considerably. Molly seeing this walked over to him and placed a hand tenderly against his arm. "Arthur, what's wrong?"

"Molly you don't suppose... no... I mean... the talk... you don't suppose he needs the talk? How can I do that when it's our own daughter he'll be thinking of when I give it to him?"

Molly laughed wickedly and gave Arthur a look he had long ago learned to recognize. The look that said, *'your in way over your head and I'm going to enjoy watching you squirm'* then she said "I'm sure you'll handle it splendidly Arthur."

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### **Defense Against the Dark Arts Class...**

The past month and a half of DADA classes was really an eye opener for Harry. Not because of the course content. Most, if not all of it, he knew already. What was fascinating was Professor Snape. Clearly he wasn't the same man he used to be. Harry couldn't guess how it had happened but obviously Mrs. Snape had more of an impact on Professor Snape's life than Harry would have believed possible.

Today the class was dueling with a powerful bludgeoning spell. The idea here was to hit your opponent and then disarm him.

Harry was in a bind and he knew it. He was scheduled to go up against Nigel Haydock of Hufflepuff. Nigel was an ok student, really a nice guy for a Hufflepuff. But Nigel Haydock was only a fair duelist.

The problem was his spells had recently taken a massive jump in power. He couldn't use that spell on his opponent, not without killing him. Harry carefully considered his options. Ron and Hermione looked at him oddly not really understanding the problem and wondering why Harry looked so concerned. Harry had noticed his power jump only a few short days ago and hadn't gotten around to telling anyone about it. He figured it was a result of all the wandless magic he had been using lately.

Whatever the reason, the simple fact was, either he'd have to throw this match, or figure out a way of winning without using the bludgeoning spell.

Harry's reverie was broken when he heard Professor Snape call his name.

"Potter, Haydock, you're up next."

The two lads walked up to the dueling arena. Nigel was clearly nervous. No one had beaten Harry Potter. His eyes kept darting to look at Harry and he licked his lips nervously. Harry smiled at him. He had an idea, it was tricky, because he'd need to be unshielded, but it might work. Maybe he could scare Nigel long enough to disarm him?

Harry took his position in the arena about forty feet from Nigel. Nigel still looked nervous. Snape barked out the commands;

"Wands at the ready!" Harry snapped his wand out.

"Bow to your opponent!" This was one of the stupider parts of the ritual, a Death Eater isn't going to take the time to bow, but Harry bowed anyway.

"NOW!" Snape barked.

Harry couched down low and muttered an incantation. "Illudo Multiculus". Suddenly, a group of knives were barreling down the arena towards Nigel. Nigel squeaked and cast the bludgeoning spell before Harry could cast the disarming spell. Harry tried to cast Protego, but before he could get it off, the bludgeoning spell hit Harry in the side, slamming him against the wall. The knives passed through Nigel's shield and, harmlessly though Nigel, who looked ready to faint dead away. The knives were an illusion. Harry needed to be unshielded in order to control the illusion.

Harry's wand spun out of his hand and for a moment everything went dark. Harry reconnected with the here and the now a second later as he slid down the wall. Harry was sure he had broken his ribs again. In pain, he didn't even think when he accidentally summoned his wand back to his hand.

"HOLD!" Snape boomed. The class was nearly over. Snape walked over to Harry and, looming over him, sneered. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, and a detention I think. See me in my office tonight after dinner."

Harry looked up at his teacher and murmured, "Nice to see you're back Professor." Then he winced when he realized what he'd just said.

Snape looked ready to spit nails. As Harry watched though, he seemed to struggle with himself. Finally, in a calmer, less arrogant tone he said, "Do you need the infirmary Potter?"

Harry winced and tried to breath shallowly "I think so Professor. I think I might have broken a rib or two."

Snape signaled to Ron and Hermione to come over and told them that since class was nearly over they could take him to see Madam Pomfrey.

The three filed out, with Harry leaning heavily on Ron. The class ended shortly after they left.

Snape sat at his desk considering what he had seen. Harry had deliberately thrown that match, gotten hurt in the process, and summoned his wand back to his hand without the use of another wand! He didn't like what he had seen and intended to get some answers from Harry tonight, if he had to drag it out of him.

Thinking back to that duel, the images of the knives flashed through his mind and he flinched inwardly. As memories cascaded through his psyche, some bitter, some sweet, he placed his head in his hands and sighed.

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### **Snape's Memories from the beginning of the summer...**

Snape could hear muffled speech nearby. Unable to make out the words, he could still recognize the timber and tone of Albus Dumbledore's voice. The Headmaster was worried. About him? He wasn't sure. Oddly comforted by the proximity of Dumbledore, Severus slipped back into the blackness.

The burning of the Dark Mark started just after his last class of the day was dismissed. He entered his office and locked the door. Grabbing his Death Eater robe and mask, he shrunk them down and stuffed them into the pocket of his robe. Placing a fire call to Dumbledore's office, he informed the Headmaster of the Dark Lord's call. Receiving a quite "Good luck, Severus", he unlocked the office door and headed for the gates of Hogwarts.

Once outside the wards, Severus inhaled deeply, cleared his mind and apparated just short of his final destination to put on his Death Eater garb. Once outfitted, he apparated into the presence of the Dark Lord.

Bowing deeply, Severus said, "As you call, so I come, my lord."

"Ah, Severus," the dusty voice of the Dark Lord replied, sending shivers down his spine. "So good of you to join us. You're such a faithful servant, aren't you? Come closer!" The voice cracked like a whip over his raw nerves.

"As my lord commands," Severus replied dutifully. Straightening, he walked towards the Dark Lord. 'A small gathering then,' Severus thought. 'Wormtail, Lucius Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle.'



Severus stopped before the Dark Lord and waited; it would never do to call him Voldemort, even in his own mind. The Dark Lord easily picked up the thoughts of his followers; even one as highly skilled as Snape. ‘And the game goes on,’ Severus thought, before quickly squashing his unruly thoughts.

“How may I serve my lord?” Severus asked.

“Crucio!” Voldemort said, almost bored.

Severus fell to his knees as pain exploded through every pore of his body. Screaming, he curled up in a fetal position. He heard three more voices cry, “Crucio!” Thought was no longer possible.

When sanity returned, Snape tried to uncurl his body, joints shrieking with every move his body made. Finally kneeling before the Dark Lord, he looked up to find Lucius Malfoy standing in front of him.

“Enjoying yourself, Severus? I certainly am,” Lucius said, smiling smugly.

“Lucius,” the Dark Lord said warningly. Lucius moved to the Dark Lord’s side, as Voldemort continued to speak.

“Perhaps my loyal servant is wondering why he has been called.” The stress placed on the word ‘loyal’ caused alarm bells to go off in Snape’s head. ‘He knows. Oh Merlin, he knows!’

“But does he deserve to be told, Master?” Lucius asked, innocently.

“Remember your place, Lucius,” the Dark Lord snarled.

“Of course, my lord,” Lucius said, bowing.

“You all get what you deserve,” the Dark Lord said carelessly. “Even you, Lucius. But we’re not here to discuss you at the moment. It’s Severus we must contend with. Severus, and his betrayal of our cause.”

Snape’s head jerked up, sending pain radiating through his body. “My lord! I would never betray...”

“Silence!” The Dark Lord bellowed. “Denial won’t work, Severus! Oh no, I know what you’ve done. Spying for that old man? Spying on ME! CRUCIO!”

Pain exploded and the world went black.

Severus snapped awake and groaned. Where am I, he asked himself, just as a voice to his right said softly “Are you in pain?”

Jerking away, he hissed at the pain. Opening his eyes, he was startled to find himself looking into the bluest eyes he’d ever seen. Blinking, he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. A woman. Yes, it was a woman. Her eyes were full of concern. Glancing away, he noticed one small, delicate hand holding a glass.

“My name is Serena. I’m here to help. You’re safe now. Albus Dumbledore found you. You’re safe,” she repeated softly.

“Where...?” His voice sounded like glass sliding over rock. Clearing his throat to try again, she interrupted.

“It’s all right. I heard you. You’re at Hogwarts. The infirmary. Albus brought me in to brew potions. Madam Pomfrey is a fine medi-witch, but she doesn’t seem able to brew potions to save her life,” the woman said lightly.

So true, Severus thought.

“I’ve brought you something to kill the pain. It can be injected, but it would be better if you can take it orally.” Pulling a strange plastic form from her pocket, she stuck it in the cup and bent the top over so he could drink from it. Seeing his puzzled expression, she smiled. “It’s called a ‘straw’. Muggle invention. It’s very useful. Makes it much easier for someone lying down to drink. It doesn’t work with all potions though,” she continued. “Some of the potions react badly with the material of the straw and can cause some unpredictable results. But I promise, this one is safe.”

Leaning down, she placed the top of the cup even with the edge of the bed and placed the straw against his lips. “Take the end of the straw into your mouth and suck. Trust me, it will be fine.”

Severus did as she instructed, still a bit dubious. Damn, it does work! Finishing the potion he leaned back against his pillow and winced.

“I know it hurts, but the potion should take effect shortly. Try to sleep if you can. I’ll check on you later.” She turned to leave.

“Wait,” he said in a voice gruff from disuse. When she turned back, he looked at her. Should he know her? Her skin was smooth, and very tanned. White curly hair hung down to a small waist. White? She looks too young for white hair. Her eyes...blue...he remembered those eyes!

“Name.... Forgot,” he croaked.

“Yours or mine?” She asked, cheekily.

Looking into her eyes, he watched as they twinkled merrily. God, she has eyes like Albus. As if one wasn’t enough!

“Yours,” he growled.

“Serena, Serena Ramos, Potion Mistress and budding nurse. Now rest.”

He’d lost count of how many times he’d been cursed and revived. Nothing existed but pain. They’d thrown him into a small, dark room the last time they revived him. He had no idea how long he’d been there.

“I’m sorry, Albus,” he whispered softly. “Looks like I won’t be coming back this time.”

The door was jerked open, and Snape shied away from the light of the torch that had been thrust into the room.

“Get up,” Lucius Malfoy snapped, kicking him in the back. “The Dark Lord wishes a word.”

Biting back a groan, Severus climbed to his shaky feet and tried to maintain his balance. Malfoy grabbed his arm and shoved him through the door, causing Severus to trip and fall to his knees. He was jerked up by Crabbe and, with Malfoy’s help, dragged into a room where the Dark Lord waited. Malfoy gave him one last shove, and Snape sprawled out on his hands and knees before Voldemort.

“Ah Severus, so good of you to have survived. We’re not done with our little play yet. I’ve promised Lucius a little treat.”

Malfoy kicked him in the stomach. Rolling over and curling into a ball, Snape bit back a scream. Hands grabbed his wrists and ankles and he was pulled from his fetal position. Now laying flat on the floor, he looked down and saw Goyle Sr. holding his legs. ‘Must be Crabbe holding my wrists,’ he thought, dazed.

“Now Severus, I realize you’ve had a rough couple of days. But I want you to enjoy this experience. So I’m going to help you,” the Dark Lord said. “I’m sure you will appreciate my efforts. Or not. Either way, it doesn’t really matter. Are you ready, Severus?”

‘What now?’ Snape thought and nearly laughed. ‘I’m losing it. But that’s good, right? Does an insane man feel pain? Sleep. I want to sleep. The merciful blackness...’

“Excito!” The Dark Lord cried, and Severus snapped into instant awareness. The grogginess was gone; his mental faculties as unimpaired as ever.

“Severus?” The Dark Lord asked.

“Yes, my lord,” Snape croaked.

“Ah good. Can you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. Now, listen close. Denials won’t help you now. I knew there was a spy in our midst, but how to find him? Lucius has been suspicious of you for some time. I assumed it was jealousy. But Lucius was persistent. He proposed a test. I found the idea amusing so I let him conduct his test. He told three people of an upcoming Death Eater attack. Are you listening, Severus?”

“Yes, my lord,” Snape whispered.

“Good. Parkinson was told of a planned attack on a muggle village near Otley. McNair was told of an attack on a village near Haverhill. And you, you were told of an attack on Hogsmeade. Do you remember Lucius telling you that?

“Yes...”

“The results of this little test? No Aurors showed up in Otley, or in Haverhill. They did, however, show up in Hogsmeade. Yes indeed. Lucius and Jameson watched from a room in the Three Broomsticks as Aurors converged on the streets of Hogsmeade. Interestingly enough, the school weekend had been cancelled shortly after your return to the castle. Why do you suppose that is, Severus?”

“My lord, please. I can explain.”

“Explain? There is nothing to explain! You betrayed me!”

“My lord...”

“SILENCE! You will not speak! I will hear nothing from you but screams. Dumbledore will get his spy back, in pieces. Lucius, get it done.”

“As my lord commands,” Lucius said, bowing.

Lucius moved and stood over Snape. “Looks like your no longer top dog, Severus,” Lucius whispered smugly. Raising his cane, he brought it down over Snape’s ribs with great force. As three ribs shattered, Severus screamed.

“I do so love that sound, Lucius,” the Dark Lord chortled.

“Yes my lord,” Lucius agreed, kicking Snape viciously in the side, eliciting another scream.

In all, four ribs, both of his legs, his right arm and left collar bone were broken under Lucius’ cane. When he passed out, or become groggy, they revived him. Severus lost track of the time. It felt like years. Decades.

Becoming bored, the Dark Lord commanded Lucius to change tactics. Kneeling beside Snape, Malfoy set his cane aside. “Now the real fun begins,” he said with an evil smile. “You’ll enjoy this, I’m sure.”

Fully aware, with every inch of his body screaming in pain, Snape watched Lucius withdraw a long, silver handled dagger from a sheath under his robe. ‘Lucius always loved getting his hands bloody,’ he thought.

“Are you ready, Severus,” Lucius asked, conversationally.

“Get on with it, you great buffoon! That was always your problem, Malfoy,” Snape sneered. “You have absolutely no sense of style!”

Enraged, Lucius plunged the dagger into Snape’s side until it grated on a rib bone. Severus screamed, then spit in Malfoy’s face. Twisting the dagger, Lucius snarled down at him. “Oh yes, Dumbledore will get you back, though I doubt there will be enough of you to recognize!”

Withdrawing the dagger with an agonizing slowness, Lucius turned to the Dark Lord and bowed. “If I may, my lord?”

“Of course, Lucius. I’m always happy to give my followers what they want. Even dear Severus will receive the death he so craves. In due time, that is. Finish it, Lucius. But make sure he lives long enough to make it to the gates of Hogwarts. Let him die in the old man’s arms!”

“As my lord commands,” Lucius replied, bowing once more. Turning back to Severus, he smiles savagely and began the bloody work.

Severus awoke, soaked and panting. Blinking and trying to calm his racing heart, he flinched violently as a hand touched his arm.

“Easy,” a soft, light voice said. “You’re safe. You’re at Hogwarts. Do you remember?”

Looking up, Snape saw a woman. She was familiar somehow. “Who are you?”

“That again,” she asked with a smile. “Serena Ramos. Do you remember? I’ve been helping Madam Pomfrey take care of you.”

Frowning, he drug up the memories of a soothing hand on his brow, the soft murmur of voices, and...?

“Humming?” he asked.

The woman sat down in a chair beside his bed and laughed quietly. “Yes, that’s me. I sometimes hum while I work. I’ve been told I don’t have the voice for it though.”

Taking a wet cloth from the table next to the bed, she gently bathed his face, frowning as he flinched away.

“It’s all right. You’re safe now. Are you in any pain?”

“A little,” he replied, hating having to admit it.

“That can be fixed easily enough,” she replied with a smile.

“How long have I been here?”

“Almost two weeks. You were badly injured, but most of it was easy to heal.”

“My injuries?”

“You want the whole list,” she asked, with a merry smile. That smile and sunny disposition could become annoying very quickly, he thought with a mental growl.

“If you don’t mind.”

As she happily rattled off his list of injuries, he scowled. One would think she was reading off a bloody shopping list!

“In addition to the broken bones, you had so many cuts and punctures that you looked like a side of raw beef,” she added in a cheerful voice. “We’ve had you so full of potions that we decided to leave the concussion to heal in its own time. While nasty, it wasn’t so bad as to cause any permanent impairment. No, overall, you’ll make a full recovery.”

“Must you be so cheerful?” He asked scathingly.

She blinked at him, and then grinned. “Why ever not? It’s not like I was the one nearly flayed to the bone out there. Besides, I was able to try out a few experimental potions on you. They worked like a dream, of course. I’m quite proud of them.”

He stared at her, incredulously. “YOU DID WHAT?” he roared.

A deep chuckle sounded from the end of his bed. Whipping his head back around, Snape grunted in pain. At the foot of the bed stood Dumbledore, smiling, blue eyes twinkling merrily.

“I see the patient is awake today,” he said unnecessarily.

“Good afternoon, Headmaster,” Serena said happily. Standing, she smiled at Dumbledore. “Since you’re here, I’ll go get Professor Snape’s next potion. He’s due.”

“Of course my dear, of course. Leave him to me.”

“Thank you sir. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She left Dumbledore with Snape and headed to Madam Pomfrey’s office. Once there, she collapsed into a chair, bit her lip and watched the medi-witch update Snape’s file. When the tears started, she wiped them away, angrily.

Seeing the young woman’s tears, Poppy leaned over and squeezed her hand. “It’s all right my dear. He’ll be fine.”

“I know. I’m just not sure I can keep up the act, Poppy. It’s too hard.”

“You must, Serena. Severus will reject any type of sympathy, no matter whom it comes from. It shouldn’t be for much longer. I wouldn’t have thought it possible when he first came in, but there have been no infections, no set backs in treatment. You’ve worked miracles my girl.”

Serena smiled wetly. “He yelled at me. I told him about some of my experimental potions and he yelled at me.”

Poppy rolled her eyes. “Yes, I heard. I think half the castle heard. It’s a good sign, Serena. You don’t know him well, but Severus has spent most of his life angry or annoyed by something. Keeping him off-balance and annoyed is the only way to treat Severus Snape. Believe me, I’ve had years of practice.”

“I’ll try, Poppy.”

Three days later, Severus woke up, feeling someone watching him. Turning his head, he found Serena sitting in a chair next to the bed. Damn, he thought. No one should be that beautiful.

“What do you want,” he asked with a growl, annoyed with his thoughts.

She tilted her head and considered the question for a moment before saying, “Voldemort dead, a new Firebolt 1500, and to be the Potion Mistress here at Hogwarts. Voldemort will have to wait, as will the Firebolt. But hey, one out of three isn’t bad to start.”

It took a moment for her rambling words to sink in. Once they did, he reared up into a sitting position. “WHAT?” he bellowed.

“My goodness,” she said mildly. “Whatever did I say to upset you?”

“Potion Mistress, Madam?”

“Oh, yes. Albus just offered me the position yesterday. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t jump for joy,” he ground out through clenched teeth.

“If you feeling like jumping around, be my guest. I certainly won’t stop you,” she said, impishly. “Of course, I’ll have to help you back up once you’ve fallen on your arse, but it might be worth it to see you caper around.” She tilted her head at him, as if waiting to see him dance a jig.

“Where is Albus,” he grated.

“He’s not at Hogwarts at the moment. Why, is there something you need?”

“A job, apparently,” he said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Resting his elbows on his knees, he held his head in his hands. Now what?

“A job? But you have a job, Professor.”

“No, you have my job, Professor,” he said, bitingly.

“Your job? But I don’t know enough to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. No, no, I’m sure I don’t have your job, Professor Snape.”

“My name is Severus,” he snapped, “and what the hell are you yammering about, woman?”

“Serena, my name is Serena.”

He growled in impatience.

Covering a chuckle with a cough, she looked up him and smiled. “When Albus told me the Potion position had become available I asked about the previous employee; always a good idea. If the teacher managed to get himself blown up, it’s always a bad sign. An incompetent teacher in the classroom makes for dangerous students!” Sensing his impatience with her rambling explanation, she cut to the chase. “Anyway, Albus said the previous Professor had been transferred to Defense

Against the Dark Arts. When I asked who that was, he said 'Severus Snape, your patient'. Unless there is more than one Snape in the castle, I'd say you have a new job." Her eyes, he noticed were dancing madly.

Such beautiful eyes, he thought. And that hair! Merlin, she's perfect. Looking down, he squeezed his head with his hands, as if to physically rein in his thoughts and grunted in reply.

"Is that a 'I'm happy with my new teaching post' grunt, or a 'I want to strangle the new Potion Mistress' grunt," she asked, the laughter clear in her voice.

"A little of both, perhaps," he said, look back at her. "The new DADA Professor, hmm?"

"So Albus tells me."

He stood up on shaky legs, a little woozy.

"What do you think you're doing," she asked, shocked.

"You'll have to forgive me, Professor, but I find I've spent entirely too much time in bed lately. I have lessons to plan and things to see to." He turned to walk away, lost his balance and started to fall over.

She caught him before he fell, helping him lower himself to sit on the bed. "Slowly, Professor."

"Severus, my name is Severus," he hissed in irritation. "I want out of this bloody bed!"

"Severus. I'll remember. As for getting out of bed, I whole-heartedly agree! You've taken up enough of my valuable time, you lazy man. However, if I might make a small suggestion?"

A growl was his only response.

"Right. How about trying it a little more slowly? You've been in bed long enough that your muscles are weak. Slow and steady, that's the key," she said cheerfully.

I'm either going to strangle her or kiss her, he thought, annoyed. Kiss her? Where the hell did that come from?

He looked at her for so long, she started to fidget.

"What?" She finally asked, exasperated.

He said nothing, but stared at her mouth in concentration. Unconsciously, she licked her lips. His eyes narrowed as he watched. She continued to fidget, feeling flushed. This is ridiculous, she thought.

Standing suddenly, she turned and rushed out, saying, "I'll get Madam Pomfrey."

One week later, Snape was more than ready to leave the infirmary, much to Poppy's dismay.



“A few more days, Severus,” Poppy pleaded, watching the man as he put on his shoes. “Just to be safe.”

“No, Poppy. I’ve been going mad for the last two days. I’m not staying any longer.”

“But Severus, you’re still...”

“Enough!” he growled. His shoes tied, he sat up. Seeing the hurt expression on her face, he raked his hands through his hair in frustration. “Look Poppy, I’m much stronger. I have things to do. I’ll come back if I have any problems, but I’m not staying here another day, let alone three!” Standing, he winced slightly as his muscles protested.

Poppy crossed her arms and glared at him. “Fine you stubborn man! But if you don’t come back for your check-up’s I’ll hunt you down. I’ll not have you wasting all our work on a relapse!” she threatened fiercely.

Reading between the words, Severus sighed. “I will Poppy. And thank you,” he said, gruffly.

“Oh,” Poppy said emotionally, pulling a tissue from her pocket and dabbing her eyes. “You’re welcome, Severus. It’s so good to have you back!”

Snape nodded, slipped around her and headed for the exit before the woman broke down in tears. He hated tears.

Serena came out of Poppy’s office at the sound of his approach. Closing the door behind her, she leaned against it and smiled at him.

“Leaving us, Severus?”

“I would have thought you’d be pleased, Serena,” he said as he stopped in front of her.

“Oh I am. You’ve wasted enough of my time with your minor scrapes and cuts.”

“Minor?” he asked, mildly.

“Umm, minor. It certainly wasn’t a stretch of my skill to heal your injuries. Potion Mistress and all that,” she said with an airy wave of her hand. “Besides, I’m getting tired of you staring at me.”

“Staring?” he said quietly, gliding closer.

“Yes, staring. Don’t think I didn’t notice you watching me. You’re not as sneaky as you like to think, Severus.”

“You think not?”

“Not much gets past my notice. Your eyes give away your actions, Severus. You really should watch that, you know. Your students will take advantage if you...” she yelped in surprise as Severus pinned her against the door with his body.

“Severus?”

“Yes, Miss Ramos?” He asked, silkily.

“What are you doing?”

Cupping her cheek in his hand, he leaned in, inches from her lips. “You tell me, Serena. You’re the expert. ‘Your eyes give away your actions’, I believe were your words.”

“Your going to kiss me, aren’t you?” She asked in a whisper.

“Ten points to the Potion Mistress,” he whispered back, before doing just that.

The kiss was soft, tentative; he gave her time to pull away if she wished. Instead, he felt her arms wrap around his neck; her body press closer to his. The small noise she made drove his good intention to hell and he deepened the kiss. Desire flared hotly between them.

A small, discreet cough from the back of the infirmary brought reality back with all the subtleness of a bucket of cold water. Pulling back slowly, Severus looked at Serena’s face, noting her heightened color and irregular breathing. Running his thumb across her swollen lips, he smiled. I knew she’d taste good. Like summer strawberries.

Leaning back, he placed a finger under her chin and tilted her head up. Looking into her eyes, he nodding in satisfaction. Turning away, he began to walk from the room. As he reached the door he said, without turning around, “Serena?”

“Ye...yes?”

“Dinner tonight. My quarters. Say 6pm?”

He heard her quiet laugh. “I’ll be there, Severus.”

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### **Professor McGonagall talks to Professor Snape...**

Snape snapped back to the here and now as someone knocked at the door. Minerva McGonagall poked her head through the doorway. “May I have a moment of your time Professor?”

“But of course Professor, what can I do for our illustrious head of Gryffindor house today?” *I hope she’s not here to gloat about that damn Quidditch cup again!*

“Miss Granger came to me the other day with an observation about Mr. Potter. At first, I was skeptical, but I agreed it was worth trying to test out her observation. In class, I had Harry cast the “Combuo Fonticulis” spell. I explained to him what the spell would do and he managed to perform it flawlessly.”

“Professor I must have spent too much time making potions. I don’t recall a Combuo Fonticulis spell.”

“That’s because it doesn’t exist Severus! It’s Latin for burning fountain; we made up a spell and told Mr. Potter about it, and he was able to cast it. Miss Granger believes that, so long as no one tells him something is impossible, he’ll find a way to do it.”

Snape’s eyes widened at the implications. “That’s... that’s incredible!” But then his eyes narrowed ominously, “That also means we have to very careful what he’s told Minerva.”

“Oh I quite agree. In any event, I’m warning all of his teachers about this. I think it’s something we all need to think about.”

Snape looked thoughtful for a moment, “I will be seeing Mr. Potter today for detention assuming Poppy releases him in time. I’ll see if I can work up some tests for this ability.”

McGonagall’s eyes narrowed. “Detention? Poppy? What have you done Severus?”

“Not me this time Minerva. I watched the boy deliberately throw a dueling match with an inferior opponent; he was injured in the exchange. I gave him detention to find out why he threw the match. Oh and I deducted points from his house too.” He smirked at her, and then continued.

“I do have another piece of interesting news Minerva. This comes by way of Serena’s conference with the Weasley’s. Unfortunately, it seems that Miss Weasley invoked a witch’s oath on her mother and my wife, so I am unable to find out exactly what was said. But Serena assures me that it is patently impossible for Potter to turn to the dark side. She was quite adamant about it. She said it was, and I quote, ‘IMPOSSIBLE’. She went on to say that Potter still has problems which can cause him a lot of pain, but he’ll never turn into another Dark Lord.”

McGonagall breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank Merlin for that!”

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### **Detention with Snape...**

Harry walked into Snape’s office after dinner that evening. Snape looked up from his desk.

“Ah Mr. Potter, would you be so kind as to explain why you deliberately threw that duel today in class? I’ve seen you duel with others and beat them easily. Now all of a sudden you are beaten by one of the poorest students in the class?”

Harry looked down at the floor and mumbled something unintelligible. Snape snapped, he had been trying to withhold his anger against the boy, but today’s incident brought some very ugly emotions to the forefront.

“I’m waiting to hear your answer, Mr. Potter!” He sneered arrogantly at Harry.

Harry looked at Snape, his anger growing in leaps and bounds. For five years he had taken abuse from this man. His eyes suddenly flared brightly with a green light and a small piece of that anger, just a fraction, got loose from his control. The room rumbled and books tumbled off the shelves.

“FINE! YOU WANT TO KNOW! I’LL TELL YOU!” Harry bellowed. “IF I HAD USED THAT BLUDGEONING SPELL ON NIGEL THIS MORNING, YOU’D BE SENDING CONDOLENCES TO HIS PARENTS AND I’D BE HEADED TO AZKABAN!”

Several desks overturned and a model dragon skeleton flashed into a fine white powder. Harry spun away from Snape, closed his eyes and tried to center himself. Slowly but surely he regained control over his emotions. Eyes still closed he said softly “I was afraid I’d kill him Professor.”

Snape was shocked. It took a moment for Harry’s words to sink in. “Har... Mr. Potter, a bludgeoning spell, even one as strong as the one we used today, would at best cause only a few broken bones.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped and he sighed. “I guess I’ll have to show you sir. Would you please conjure a stone target for me? Something really strong?”

Snape conjured a man-sized target at one end of the classroom dueling area as Harry murmured, “This started happening to me only a few days ago.”

Harry turned to the target and in a very soft voice invoked the bludgeoning spell they had been using that day. The spell hit the target with a sharp crack. The target shattered into small fragments. Snape staggered back in shock and turned to stare at Harry. Shaking himself he pointed to a chair. “Have a seat, Mr. Potter.”

Snape sat and leaned back in his own chair while contemplating how to approach this problem.

“Har... eh... Mr. Potter, I’ve seen this sort of thing once before. It all boils down to power. It’s quite rare really, but what it all means is you need to learn how much power to use to get the job done. For most of us, it doesn’t matter because we have a limit on how much power we can draw from. My bludgeoning spell is not much stronger or weaker than, say, Alistair Moody’s bludgeoning spell. In rare cases however, some people seem to become blessed with more power than is necessary to get things done. I think you were quite right; you could have killed your opponent today. For now, I will excuse you from further dueling. But I think I will insist that allow me to help you learn to control the amount of power you use for a spell.” His voice softened somewhat, “Allow me to offer you this as a way of making up for our past history.”

Harry eyed Snape suspiciously for a moment, and then figured it was worth a shot. Harry couldn’t continue fighting the whole world and if he was going to learn to offer forgiveness, Snape was a great place to start. Harry nodded to his dreaded Professor and wondered what this meant in the grand scheme of things. Professor Snape’s lips twitched, and Harry looked at him intensely. Could it have been a smile? No wait, the world was still here. Hell still burned.

“Very well, Mr. Potter. I expect to see you at least one night a week in my private quarters. I will get some texts from the library for you to read. There are certain exercises, which you will have to learn from said books since no one here can teach them to you.

As for the remained of tonight’s detention,” he continued, picking up a stack of papers from his desk and holding them out, “take these and grade them. They’re 1st and 2nd year Defense homework. You should know the subject material well enough by now.”

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### **The Marauders strike again...**

The meeting was totally clandestine. They had set it up well in advance. Harry met Ginny in the Gryffindor common room; it was nearly 1am. Harry nodded to Ginny, then transformed to Wings. Grasping a tail feather Ginny felt herself lift off the ground and they immediately flame-traveled to the Ravenclaw common room where they met Luna. She grabbed another tail feather and in a flash they went to the Great Hall.

Harry transformed back into his normal form and looked at the other two girls. In a hushed whisper he said, "You both know what to do?"

Ginny and Luna giggled and all three huddled together trying to shush each other. Ginny broke from the huddle and ran over to the Slytherin table; Luna went to the Ravenclaw table. She didn't mind pranking her own house, since she was not very popular and had few people she could call friends there. She was careful to put a reduced version of the spell on her own chair, which nobody in Ravenclaw ever used. After finishing the teacher's table, Harry went over to help Ginny do their own house.

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### **Breakfast the next morning...**

Harry and Ginny ran down to the Great Hall with a sense of anticipation. They didn't want to miss the show. Everything was keyed on one person and they wanted to be there when it happened.

The Great Hall was filled to about 80 percent capacity when Professor Dumbledore arrived from a side door and took his seat. Suddenly, the enchanted ceiling turned a blazing white and a booming voice echoed throughout the hall.

"HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY! YOU. HAVE. BEEN. PRANKED!"

The ceiling faded back to normal and everyone looked around nervously. Something was happening, but no one knew what. Hermione stared at Harry suspiciously. But Harry gave her an innocent look.

It started off slow and low. First a Slytherin girl farted loudly and looked around mortified. A boy at the Ravenclaw table started to hiccup. Neville started to giggle.

In another minute 8 Slytherins farted, 12 Ravenclaws were hiccupping steadily and half of Gryffindor House was giggling, including Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione.

Barely a minute later, the entire house of Slytherin were experiencing extreme flatulence. The sound was most impressive; the smell was worse. All of Gryffindor was giggling at this point and people at the Ravenclaw table were scrambling for water, trying to make the hiccups stop.

EVERYONE was glaring at the Hufflepuffs, the one house that seemed totally unaffected by the prank.

The sound in the Great Hall was incredible. The noise from Slytherin sounded like a war involving heavy artillery. Ravenclaws seemed to be hiccupping their way into hyper drive. And people at the Gryffindor table were sliding off their seats and under the table as their giggles turned to full laughter. Bright flashes of light came from the Slytherin table as the noxious methane cloud rose up to meet the candles floating overhead and ignited.

As quickly as it had started it stopped. Those students not in their seats scrambled to get into them. As one, the affected student body turned to glare at the unscathed Hufflepuffs.

Professor Dumbledore rose from his seat, his eyes twinkling over his half moon glasses, and said, "Would anyone from Hufflepuff care to explain this?" The Great Hall was silent in shock. Professor Dumbledore sounded like Professor Sprout! He raised one eyebrow.

Professor McGonagall stood up and said in a loud voice, "er now, which one of you did this?" Her eyes widened in shock and her hand flew to her mouth. She sounded like Hagrid! Suddenly all of the teachers were talking among themselves as they realized that everyone had swapped voices and speaking styles.

The students once again erupted in laughter. Dumbledore sat back down, his blue eyes twinkling madly, and tried hard to control his own laughter as Professor Severus Snape snapped at Professor Hagrid with Professor McGonagall's brogue. Serena Snape was looking at Harry and Ginny at the Gryffindor table with a bemused smile.

Harry turned to Ginny and, leaning down, gently placed his forehead against hers. Looking deeply into her eyes, he whispered "Mischief..."

"Managed..." she whispered back.

Hermione stared at the pair suspiciously. They wouldn't have pranked their own house would they? She wasn't so sure. They looked so incredibly smug and entirely too pleased with themselves. But no, they wouldn't prank their own house. Not even they would stoop so low.

Hermione was about to go in for the kill when she was interrupted by the morning owls. Pig seemed to be struggling to stay aloft. With an exhausted hoot the tiny owl crashed in front of Ron, spilling his drink. A second, much larger owl landed in front of Ginny. Both owls were carrying a small pouch and a letter. Ginny removed the letter and pouch from the post owl; her eyes bulged out when she felt the pouch. She tore the letter open.

*Ginny dear,*

*I understand that the school will be having several balls this year. Your father has come into a bit of extra money and he insists that you should spend some to get yourself something really pretty to wear. Try to get something to that matches what Harry will be wearing dear. Make him drool Ginny. We've sent Ron similar instructions.*

*Love*

*Mum*

Ginny opened the pouch and gasped as she saw five 10 galleon coins. She could buy something really great for that kind of money!

Ron tore open his letter.

Ronald,

*I understand that the school will be having several dances this year. Your father has come into some extra money and he insisted that you replace your dress robes with something better. We've also added in another 50 galleons so that you can purchase a nice robe for Hermione. You and she should match for these special occasions. Ginny will be buying herself new robes with money we sent her as well.*

Love

Mum

*PS. Ronald dear, if you're smart, you'll let Hermione pick out your robe for you.*

Ron passed his letter to Hermione to read. Hermione squeaked and threw her arms around Ron.

Ginny eyed Harry. He was busy eating ignoring the three of them and thumbing through pages of his notebook. *What's going on behind those green eyes of yours, Mr. Potter? Your hiding something and it says so all over your face! Thankfully Ron is too stupid to see it. But you're wrong if you think you can hide it from me Harry!*

Harry continued reading and eating, oblivious to Ginny's suspicion.

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### **The night before Hogsmeade...**

Over the next week, Harry read the texts that Professor Snape had provided. His one visit to the Professor's private quarters actually turned into a pleasant conversation on the nature of magic.

Harry was a little worried about Ginny; she had that predatory look in her eye ever since the morning of their prank. He was sure she was going to question him about the money her parents sent her and he wasn't sure how she'd feel about what he did. As a result, he managed to arrange having someone with him whenever she caught up with him. He knew she wanted to talk to him in private. This was one tactic he was positive wouldn't work for long.

Ginny finally caught up with Harry on the Friday before the trip to Hogsmeade. He was in the room of requirement as she suspected, but instead of training like last time, she caught him alone, sitting at a table surrounded by books. He was bent over a large tome copying notes to his notebook. Now her curiosity was really piqued. Harry wasn't the bookish type. She always considered herself pretty smart, and Hermione really smart, but Harry never seemed like the type to do any independent studying.

Harry leaned back, pushed his glasses up on his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. Ginny walked up silently behind him. Whatever he was working on, it was important enough that he didn't even sense her approach.

She reached out a hand to touch his shoulder.

"Harry?"

Harry jumped and spun around. Smiling weakly, he murmured, "Caught again."

“Have you been deliberately avoiding me Harry?”

“Not really, Ginny. But there were certain questions I didn’t want to answer because I wasn’t sure how you’d take them.”

“About the money?”

Harry winced and nodded affirmatively.

“You did that. Harry, I can see it now. But why hide it? And why be afraid of me asking you about it?”

“I wasn’t sure how’d you take it. Plus, there’s Ron.”

Ginny suddenly realized what Harry was talking about. Her brother hated being poor and wearing second hand clothes, but he was steadfastly against anyone helping him out either. As far as Ron was concerned, charity was for others. His pride wouldn’t tolerate it. Ron and her were a like in many ways, but she realized Harry wasn’t offering her charity.

“Ok, I can understand that Harry, and I accept it. Just understand two things please. I am not my brother, and please don’t ever be afraid to ask me something. Sure, the day might come when you tell something that makes me angry with you, but I think I’d be more hurt and angry if you didn’t ask me.

I’m pleased that you’d think to do this Harry, and even more pleased for what you did for Ron and ‘Mione. I suppose I should warn you that ‘Mione already suspects something, but don’t worry. She’d never mention anything about it to Ron.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m sorry Gin. I just didn’t know how you’d take it and I really wanted to do something special for you.”

Ginny sat down on Harry’s lap and looked at the pile of books and notes scattered about the table. “So, what have you been working on? I’ve seen you carrying around your notebook and various textbooks since the start of school.”

Harry pointed at the pile of books. “This is my maze...” Ginny looked puzzled. “There’s muggle computer game where you get lost in a maze and at every intersection you are told you are lost in a maze. Every corridor looks the same no matter which direction you look.” Ginny looked at Harry, her confusion plain on her face.

“Ok, lets try it this way. At the beginning of the year I was getting really pissed off because my scar was hurting all the time. This was before I learned that spending some time in my phoenix form seemed to help a lot. I know ‘Mione researched curse scars back in our second and third years, but she drew a blank on that research. I thought maybe I could try it from a different angle. Instead of researching curse scars, I could learn about magical bonds. My scar is just a scar, but inside my head is a bond to Voldemort. The scar is just a physical mark that Voldemort left me with. It gets ugly, bleeds sometimes, and causes pain, but the bond that controls all that isn’t in the scar. Or at least I don’t think it is.



So anyway, I started looking at bonds created by magic. Love bonds between lovers, bonds between business partners, bonds created between people and animals and so on. Things weren't going very well and I found myself getting sidetracked. I'd stumbled onto an ancient text, which described a very old variation of the Protean charm. That's the charm that Voldemort uses to inscribe the Dark Mark on his followers. If what I'm reading is correct, there may be several ways to attack that particular bond and turn it against Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Heck, if I read this right, there may be even a way to remove the Dark Mark."

Ginny was impressed. She never guessed that Harry so smart. *Ok that wasn't nice*, she thought. She knew Harry was smart, possibly even as smart as Hermione was, but normally he wasn't this focused. *Brains and Brawn? Such nice brawn too. Such lovely brawn and what a tight butt. Oh God I'm melting! SNAP OUT OF IT GINNY!* She thought to herself before turning her attention back to what he had said. She flipped through his notebook, seeing meticulous handwriting in place of his usual sloppy scrawl. She also noticed the comments he'd made on spells and even a few well-drawn diagrams.

"Harry this is some really good work. You should probably show it to someone."

"No Ginny. First off, it's not done and secondly I'm not Hermione. People would look at this and only laugh at me. I'm not the Bushy-Haired-Book-Witch, I'm just the Bloody-Boy-Who-Lived."

Scowling at Harry, she remembered her conversation with her mother. "Harry, people won't laugh at that. I think you may have done some really unique work here and think it needs to be shown to someone. But I'm not going to push you about this. I think you're wrong, but that's how it's supposed to be. The woman is always right in a relationship."

They kissed for a moment, then Harry pulled back saying, "Oh so you're always right?"

She leaned in and kissed him again. "Always!"

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### **Morning of the Hogsmeade visit...**

The morning of the first Hogsmeade visit was chaotic as usual. Students rushed about, looking for friends in the Great Hall, causing a jam in the wide doorway. On Hogsmeade days, the lines between the houses blurred as people sought out companions to go with them to town. As Harry tried to squeeze through a large group of third year girls congregating at the Great Hall door, he growled silently in frustration. He just wanted something to eat! One of the girls noticed him and, with a squeak, pushed a few of the others out of the way. Harry rolled his eyes and slipped into the Hall.

Harry didn't have much money on him. Remus had arranged for him to carry a Gringots charge card, which automatically deducted money from his vaults. Spotting Ginny, he waved, and then he saw Neville and Luna sitting off at the Ravenclaw table. He motioned to Ginny that he'd just be a moment and walked over to talk to Neville and Luna.

Placing an arm around each he leaned down between the two of them.

"Say Neville are you planning on asking Luna to the Halloween ball?"

Neville had spent the last week verbally debating that very question with him self in his dorm room, driving his dorm mates nuts in the process. Neville turned three shades of red and started to stammer. Harry turned and winked at Luna. "Did you know, Luna, that Neville's been asking everyone but you that question all week?"

Neville started violently. "Harry!"

Luna smiled and said in a dreamy voice, "Oh yes, I had heard about it. I think he was waiting for a proper moon phase. But yes, Neville, I will go to the ball with you."

Neville was still staring angrily at Harry as Luna's words sunk in. He turned to Luna and asked shyly, "You will?"

Harry looked at the two with amusement and told them that IF they found the time, Ginny, Hermione, Ron and himself would be at the Three Broomsticks around 3pm if they wanted to stop by. With that he walked back to the Gryffindor table to have his breakfast.

Ginny looked over towards Neville and Luna who were now leaning against each other. Neville seemed to be trying to burn out his blush lamp as Luna whispered in his ear. Ginny smiled and nudged Hermione with her foot. Hermione looked up at Ginny and followed the direction of her finger to spot Neville and Luna.

Harry sat down and started to fill his plate. Hermione turned back to the table and pointedly asked, "Ok Harry, what did you do?"

Harry shrugged telling them, "I got tired of those two dancing around each other. I just asked Nev if he had finally asked Luna to the dance or not."

Ron snickered. Hermione didn't know if she should be pleased or annoyed at Harry for ruining a perfect romantic tragedy.

Harry turned in his seat to Ginny, taking one of her hands in his own. "Will you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you to the ball?"

Ginny suddenly blushed and gave him a demure smile. "Of course Mr. Potter."

Harry kissed her hand and turned back to his breakfast, then thought about it and gave Ron a pointed stare. Hermione was again looking wistful. Ginny kicked Ron under the table and he gave out a sharp yelp.

Ron looked at the two of them, sighed, and then turned to Hermione to ask her out to the dance as well. He copied Harry's method and, it probably would have worked well for him, except he had forgotten to wipe his hands after putting down the sticky bun he'd been eating. With sticky hands and all, he asked Hermione to the dance. She stammered out a yes to him and he turned back to eat. Hermione looked at her sticky hands and just sighed.

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## Hogsmeade...

The four set out for Hogsmeade mid morning. Ron wanted to hit Honeydukes first, but the girls stared him down. The first stop would be Gladrags, whether Ron liked it or not. The four enjoyed the pleasant walk to town and made a beeline straight to Gladrags. Harry looked at Ron and shrugged. He didn't care about clothes very much. As long as things fit he was happy with them. The girls, on the other hand, had other ideas.

Ginny hadn't had much opportunity to spend freely on clothes before. She knew what she liked, but rarely had the chance to shop like this. Hermione came from affluent muggle parents, but this was also a first for her. She had never shown much interest in clothing before, books being her principle passion. Both girls wanted something special they could wear.

Upon entering Gladrags (with outlets in London and Paris!), Ginny dragged Harry off to one measuring stand while Hermione dragged Ron to another. Apparently both girls had decided before hand they would make sure the boys were properly attired.

An elderly witch came out to take Harry's measurements. The measuring tape ran over Harry's body like a snake slithering, stopping only long enough for the witch to take measurements. Ginny and her conversed in some arcane language that was part English and part telepathy.

"I take it you want his..." The witch asked.

Ginny thought for a moment then said, "I suppose so, but wouldn't it be better to accent his..."

The old witch cackled with glee over that and replied, "Oh of course! But we don't want to put too much emphasis on his..."

"No, that wouldn't do at all. But it's always like that, so I think maybe if we..."

"Excellent choice, dear," the witch agreed.

To say that Harry was bewildered would have been an understatement. After the measuring, came a parade of robes in an eye-blinding swirl of colors. The ONLY time Harry refused to try one on was when the elderly witch offered a shockingly fluorescent pink robe. Ginny pouted for a moment then agreed. Pink would not match her natural colors anyway. Finally, Ginny settled on a deep forest green colored robe and even Harry agreed it didn't look bad. Harry also decided to pick up another black robe, this one with a silver trim.

Ginny pointed at a chair and told him to sit there and not to move. Suddenly, Harry felt like a three year old being told not to wander off on his first visit to the store. Harry sat waiting while Ginny and the old witch disappeared into the back room for her to try on her robes. Ron joined him a short while later. The two looked at each other sheepishly and thus they learned one of the most important lessons a man learns. Women like to shop and love to have their man tag along, bored senseless.

After what seemed an eternity, both Ginny and Hermione exited the back room. Ron paid for their purchases, Ginny paid for hers and Harry charged the purchase to his vault. The robes would be delivered to them during the week. The group decided to split up at that point and to meet

again at the Three Broomsticks at 3pm. Ron and Hermione wanted to check out Honeydukes, Harry and Ginny were more interested in Zonkos. They felt they were on a spy mission for Fred and George.

Upon exiting Gladrags, Ginny spied Dervish and Banges and asked Harry if he'd wait for a moment while she went to check something out. Harry said he'd just check out the window of Zonkos while she did her business. After a few minutes Ginny was back carrying a small package. She pocketed the package and they went into Zonkos.

Zonkos had the usual fair, exploding wands, winged paper, vanishing cups (the cups vanished, leaving the contents behind). It was a nice shop, but to be honest, Fred and George had them beat.

After the visit to Zonkos, Harry and Ginny spent a pleasant day wandering around Hogsmeade. Occasionally, they would slip behind a building for a bit of privacy and some snogging. By three that afternoon they had met up with Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna at the Three Broomsticks.

Madam Rosemerta brought over their butterbeers and the six of them had just begun to relax when a scream was heard from the street. Harry tensed. There was a moment of silence and a second scream was heard. The table was facing the window and they could see some people running. A third scream, this one gut wrenching in its terror, tore through them. The three couples drew their wands and bolted for the door...

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### **Diagon Alley...**

Remus Lupin was just finishing up some Order business and had promised Molly that he'd drop by Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes to see how Fred and George were doing. Remus loved visiting their shop, since they were always willing to show him their new inventions. Some of them were nearly worthy of Marauder status in Remus's book. Besides, being here gave Remus a chance to wave to Tonks. She was on duty today while a shipment of Ministry gold was sent to Gringots.

Remus was looking over a new toy the twins had come up with, called Kiddy Kickers when he heard the sound of an explosion. Looking out the window he could see people scattering everywhere. Remus, Fred and George drew their wands and bolted for the door.

It took a moment for Remus to realize what he was seeing. A group of twenty Death Eaters were attacking the ministry gold shipment and the ten Aurors protecting it!

Remus dropped one Death Eater with a well-placed Reducto spell to the shoulder. Fred and George each dropped two with Incarcerous. Now there were only eighteen death eaters, sandwiched between the ten Aurors and the three Order members.

Remus rolled out of the way of a killing curse, leaving himself unprotected. He looked wildly around, and then spotted a place to take cover again. Jumping to his feet he took two steps when he was hit with a Reducto spell in his side. He collapsed to the ground and lay in a slowly expanding pool of blood.

Curses and counter curses flew. A fourth Death Eater collapsed, then an Auror. From the direction of the Leaky Cauldron came the sound of running feet as additional help started to arrive. The

Death Eaters, seeing the tide turn against them started to apparate away, leaving their fallen comrades to fend for themselves.

Fred and George ran to Remus. Neither was trained in medical spells. Remus was losing a lot of blood fast. Spotting Tonks in front of Gringots, Fred yelled to her.

“TONKS! OVER HERE! HURRY!”

Tonks looked toward Fred and George and, spotting Remus, her face turned ashen and she sprinted over to them. The twins gently turned Remus over. He was still awake, but fading fast. Tonks was trembling and crying. “Remus, damn your mangy hide, don’t you leave me!”

Remus looked up at her and smiled faintly, “Luv you Tonks... tell Harry...” and with that, he slipped into unconsciousness.

Tonks looked stunned, of course! Wings! Her tears stopped. “Find Harry, Fred. NOW! He’s in Hogsmeade today. Tell him to meet us at Grimmauld Place with Wings.” Pulling a portkey from her robes, George, Remus and Tonks disappeared.

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### **Meanwhile back in Hogsmeade...**

Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna rushed out of the three broomsticks. Coming up the road was a crowd followed by a group of Dementors. Harry’s blood chilled and a righteous anger burned in him. He glanced at Ginny, then his hand snapped forward and he shouted “EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

Prongs sprang from his wand, charging down the nearest Dementor. Hermione copied Harry, casting her Patronus. A large otter appeared and ran down the road, charging another Dementor. Ginny, who had never achieved a corporeal Patronus before, produced a very respectable fox. Luna’s Patronus turned out to be a copy of the fabled Luna moth.

Ron did a dog and Neville a bear.

Students in the crowd, spotting Harry and the others, took courage and started casting their Patronuses. Soon, the road was crowded with a veritable zoo of glowing animals; there were rabbits, ducks, cats, birds of all sorts, even a mouse and snake! The dementors were being driven back. Harry pushed to the front, yelling to the people to get behind the students and their Patronuses. Harry looked on with horror as a he spotted a small girl, no older than five years old, collapsed on the ground, a single Dementor looming over her about to give her the kiss.

Something in Harry snapped! His eyes burned with intensity and a nimbus of light seemed to surround him. Still directing Prongs with his wand, he shot out his other hand directly at the Dementor threatening the little girl. A bright beam of light flashed from his hand, hitting the Dementor in the back. An unholy howl was heard throughout Hogsmeade, as smoke seemed to boil off the Dementor. The beam from Harry’s hand then split and hit a couple other Dementors who also began to howl and smoke. The light continued to brighten until Harry had to close his eyes against it. The howling stopped and Harry sunk to his knees, exhausted.

Ron, Neville and Ginny rushed to Harry's side. The remaining Dementors had retreated. Ron helped Harry stand. Ginny pulled one arm over her shoulder. There was a sound of popping noises as teachers started apparating into the area.

Fred Weasley appeared in front of Harry. He shouted something that took a moment to sink into Harry's weary mind. *Something about Remus?* He shook his head. *Remus was hurt? Tonks needs Wings?*

"Help me get around the side of the building. I only need a few minutes. Fred, get to Grimmauld Place and make sure no one else but you, Tonks and George is in the room. Gin, Hermione, stall the teachers. Give me five minutes please?" His eyes pleaded with them all.

Ginny wanted to object. Harry was exhausted, but Remus was too important to him. She bit her lip and nodded fearfully.

Ron and Ginny helped Harry walk to the back of the Three Broomsticks. Once there, they let go of his shoulders. Harry swayed dangerously and transformed into Wings. With one beat of his wings he was aloft and gone in a flash of fire.

The living room of Grimmauld Place was tense. Tonks paced nervously. Fred reappeared and said Harry was on his way. He was about to mention the Hogsmeade attack to Tonks when, with a flash of light, a black phoenix appeared over Remus.

Remus was pale, still breathing, but very shallowly. Tonks and Fred turned Remus on his side to expose the wound. Wings glided over to land next to Remus. His head bowed low, even in this form the phoenix looked tired.

Silently the phoenix wept for his friend, the last Marauder. The phoenix tears flowed freely into the wound and immediately it started to close. Remus's color improved and he started to breathe more deeply. His eyes fluttered open and he looked up at Tonks. A small smile played around his lips before his eyes closed once more.

It took a moment for Tonks to realize he'd just fallen asleep.

Wings stepped away from Remus and seemed to have a lot of trouble getting airborne. He gave several tired beats of his wings before getting aloft, then vanished in a flash of fire.

Tonks frowned for a moment. She turned to the twins and said, "If you tell anyone about Harry, I'll personally carve out your bits and pieces."

They both nodded. Then Fred spoke up. "Tonks, you should know, Hogsmeade was also attacked. When I arrived, Harry had just chased off or destroyed a bunch of Dementors. He was exhausted and being supported by Ron and Ginny when I got there."

Tonks blanched. "Oh Harry, you stupid loyal kid. I'm gonna hug the stuffing out of you when I next see you!" she muttered then motioned to the twins to help her get Remus up to their room.

Professor McGonagall couldn't understand a damn thing. Ron, Neville, Luna, Ginny and Hermione were all talking to her at once, drowning each other out. She tried once to get them to

slow down and talk one at a time, but they started right back up again. She was beginning to get angry. In another minute, she'd silence them all and start issuing detention! From the corner of her eye, she caught movement.

Harry Potter staggered around the building. Seeing McGonagall, he attempted to straighten up. The other students trailed off, staring at him. Harry swayed for a moment, then his eyes rolled up in his head and the ground came crashing up to meet him.

"HARRY!" Ginny screamed in horror as she rushed to his side.

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## Chapter 6 Harry's Notebook.

### #12 Grimmauld Place, night of the attack and the morning after...

Remus lay in his bed still weak from blood loss. The wound had sealed up soundly, but his fever kept spiking, as though his body was trying to burn out an infection. At times, he seemed on the verge of transforming. Tonks, watching over him, became concerned enough to Floo Madam Pomfrey just after midnight, asking her to check on Remus come morning.

By morning Tonks was exhausted, but the fever had broken and Remus was sleeping peacefully again.

The door to their room opened and Poppy walked in carrying her bag of potions and other supplies. Tonks jerked out of her nap and stood from the chair. Poppy walked over to the bed and pulled back the coverlet so she could see Remus better.

"Hmmm, you say he was hit on the right side, Tonks?"

"Yes Poppy, but we got that healed pretty quick. I'm more concerned about the fever he had last night. At some points he started to cycle through pieces of his transformation."

Poppy looked at where Remus had been injured and frowned. Clearly there was new skin covering the wound, but the size of it! He shouldn't have survived that injury! Poppy looked at Tonks, then down at the newly grown skin, lighter in color than the surrounding area. Tonks looked nervous.

Poppy took out her wand and ran a few scanning spells on Remus. She'd try and figure out that fatal but not fatal wound later. Poppy frowned; with a full moon only a week away, Remus's aura should contain a heavy tinge of black in it, but it was clear. *Let's try the specific Lycanthropy detection spell*, she thought. As she cast the spell, a pale blue light surrounded Remus.

*That's not right*, she thought. *It should be a dark blue.*

She tried several more tests to detect Lycanthropy. Finally, she walked over to the door and closed it. Turning back to Tonks, she said, "Nymphadora Tonks, I want to know what you're hiding from me!" Crossing her arms, she glared grumpily at the young woman before her.

Tonks jerked up like she had been kicked, off balance she fell backward into the chair with a heavy thud.

“But... but... Poppy... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Tonks, first you show me a wound that I could not possibly heal, yet you managed to do just that. That wound should have killed him.”

Tonks looked up fearfully and whispered, “We had help from a phoenix Poppy. There wasn’t time to get him to St. Mungos, or to you.” Tonks looked stricken, “You can’t tell anyone about the phoenix Poppy. I’ve given my oath to protect him.”

Poppy thought for a moment and then nodded. “Now Tonks, explain the Lycanthropy please.”

Tonks gave puzzled look, “The Lycanthropy? What about it?”

Poppy looked ready to strangle the younger woman if she didn’t start coming up with answers. She ground her teeth for a moment then said, “It isn’t there anymore! I’ve used two of the most common tests for Lycanthropy and several others which can detect and suggest Lycanthropy and they all come up negative!”

Tonks gave Poppy a fairly perfect imitation of a goldfish that has escaped the bowl before recovering. “It’s... it’s... gone? Are you sure? I don’t know how that could be; we just used the phoenix tears. It’s really gone Poppy? You aren’t lying to me?” Poppy looked at Tonks and could see the desperate plea in her eyes. This was obviously something that Tonks didn’t expect to hear.

Poppy walked over and knelt down next to the chair; she was now eye to eye with Tonks. “Yes child, its gone. I want him to see Healer Sorenson at St. Mungos to be absolutely certain, but I doubt he’ll tell you different.”

Tears slid down the cheeks of the normally outgoing and tough Auror. A night of pain and worry washed away by tears of joy.

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### **Hogwarts, 2 days after the attack...**

Harry slowly opened his eyes. It was still dark out, the room was candlelit, and dawn was only a short while away. He didn’t need to have his glasses on to know where he was, his bed. Well, his bed in the Hogwarts Infirmary, anyway. He sighed softly and stretched. His hand reached up and he fumbled sightlessly around the table. Suddenly, there were two red haired blurs by his side. Both reached out to touch him, to caress his cheek and hair. One blur moved his glasses into his hand and he put them on.

The glasses, as they always did, took a few seconds to adjust to his needs, before the two blurs focused into a sharp relief. Ginny, dressed in her running clothes, was on one side of the bed, Molly on the other, smiling down at him. She spoke before Ginny could.

“How are you feeling, Harry? You gave Professor McGonagall quite a fright when you appeared and collapsed like that.”



Harry thought about it. He didn't hurt; that was a good sign. He felt tired, and kind of weak, but that's about it.

"I supposed I could feel worse, just tired and weak but nothing hurts."

Ginny said softly, "You've been asleep since Saturday Harry, that was nearly two days ago."

Harry was puzzled for a moment before it all came crashing back to him. He bolted upright, the movement making him dizzy. "Hogsmeade! Dementors! Remus! What happened?" He swayed in the bed and both Molly and Ginny pushed him back down.

Molly said she'd go get Madam Pomfrey and let her know he's awake. Ginny spoke softly, "How much do you remember, Harry?"

"I remember seeing that little girl about to get kissed and thinking I couldn't allow it to happen. Then you and Ron were holding me and Fred was shouting that Remus needed my help. I remember being so tired, and helping Remus, then coming back. After that, nothing."

"Four people were kissed in Hogsmeade, but there would have been a lot more had it not been for you Harry. The DA members in the crowd rallied behind you, then other students came to help. They estimate over 50 Dementors were in that attack. When you pushed forward, we all followed. You saved that little girl Harry. She lost her parents, but you saved her. Everyone is buzzing because you destroyed that Dementor, and at least three others. They found four empty Dementor cloaks."

Harry's eyes began to blur with tears. "Four people kissed... she... an orph... orph... orphan?" Harry trembled violently, squeezing his eyes shut.

Molly and Madam Pomfrey returned to find Ginny with her arms wrapped around Harry, holding him tight. He was weeping in her arms. Molly sat on the side of the bed and wrapped her arms around the two of them. Ginny explained that the news of the little girl he'd saved had upset him greatly. Madam Pomfrey handed Molly a calming draught to give him. With a little coaxing he downed the potion. It wasn't long before it took effect.

Harry lean forward while Ginny propped up some pillows behind him. As he leaned back, Madam Pomfrey ran some tests. She made some notes and then said, "Well Mr. Potter, you not only continue to beat the odds, but astound me as well. I had expected you to be bed ridden for at least a week. You came here with almost no magical reserves left and normally that would have taken at least a week to recharge. But you're recharged already. I guess nothing you do should surprise me anymore." She looked down at him with disapproval. When he sent her a small, grateful smile, her expression softened.

"Very well, I want to keep you here 'til tomorrow. I'll release you in time for breakfast." She twitched his blankets straight, touched his cheek, and then headed back to her office, muttering about the possibility of moving Harry's dorm bed into the infirmary.

Harry leaned back and looked at Molly Weasley. "Mum... er... Mrs Weasley..."

Molly interrupted him “Harry, Arthur and I talked about this. We know we can’t replace your real parents and we understand why you couldn’t call us by aunt and uncle. Why don’t you just call me Molly?”

Harry closed his eyes to hide his relief. This was a problem that had been plaguing him for a while and he hadn’t been sure how to address it. With his eyes still closed he nodded and spoke. “Ok Mrs... umm... Molly, I need to ask you a favor. That little girl... can you find out what is going to happen to her? I want to make sure she goes to a home where people will appreciate her. If necessary, I’ll hire a solicitor to see she’s given to a good home, not left with people who won’t love her.”

Molly’s eyes filled with tears. *He’s always concerned about others before himself*, she thought. She engulfed Harry in a fierce hug and whispered in his ear, “Harry you have a huge heart. I’ll speak to Arthur, he’ll know who to talk to.”

Harry smiled and reached out for Ginny’s hand. She had sat silently watching their exchange. Harry pulled Ginny’s hand close to his cheek like he was drawing her strength to him; his eyes closed and his breathing deepened. He had fallen asleep again.

Ginny returned to the common room to get ready for her day of classes. Molly, satisfied that Harry was going to be fine, returned to the Burrow via the infirmary floo.

Harry spent the rest of his day dozing and talking with friends who came to visit. During those times when no one was there, he worked more on his notebook and wrote a long letter to Remus, telling him about the little girl and the attack. Madam Pomfrey had suggested he talk to someone about how he was feeling and writing that letter to Remus seemed to help him a lot.

Before he fell asleep that night he decided to have a little fun.

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### **Breakfast...**

Madam Pomfrey walked out of her quarters and into her office. The house elves had already delivered her customary breakfast of tea and toast. She sat for a few moments before going out to release her charge.

Poppy smiled. Harry had it pretty rough, but he always seemed to bounce back. She just prayed that he wouldn’t run into something he couldn’t bounce back from. She walked out of her office and came to a shocked halt. Harry was already up, getting dressed in the clothes his friend had brought to him the night before. He looked up at her shyly as she started to smile, then she chuckled.

Above the doors to the infirmary was a sign; it looked to be bronze with the lettering cut into the metal. It read,

“Within these Hallowed Doors works the Finest Healer in the World.”

Above the bed he had been using was a far smaller bronze plaque reading, “Harry Potter’s Bed.”

She tried to assume a stern tone with him, but couldn't maintain it.

"Well Mr. Potter, if you're that well, I'll assume you can get along to breakfast now. Shoo with you!" She said, smiling. Harry smiled back and with a wave he headed out of the infirmary.

Entering the Great Hall, he spotted Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna huddled together and wondered what they were up to. Surely they weren't about to prank him? With a grin he joined them. He sat down and started to fill his plate when he noticed they were all staring at him with silly grins on their faces. He paused, his hand holding a ladle full of eggs half way to his plate.

Warily he asked, "What's going on?"

Hermione looked at the others and spoke up. "Harry, we decided... that is Ginny had the idea and we all... Oh bloody hell!" Harry blinked. *Hermione never cursed... well rarely* he corrected himself. She started again.

"Harry, we all know how important your mum's letter is to you, so we've decided to take steps to keep it safe." Hermione pulled the letter from her pocket. Harry frowned. Either she or Ron would have had to root through his trunk to find that. He was about to say something when Ginny handed him a small box, tied with a ribbon.

Inside the box was a small square locket with a glass face, hanging from a fine silver chain. Ginny took the locket from Harry's hands and placed it on the table. Hermione placed the letter atop the locket. The letter trembled for a second and vanished. Hermione picked up the locket and chain, passing it back to Harry. He could just see the letter, shrunk to a tiny size behind the glass face. He looked up at Hermione.

"It will always be safe there Harry. Tap it once with your wand and the contents of the locket will be displayed almost like a pensieve. Tap it twice and the letter will be extracted. We know how important that letter is to you Harry. Now, you can keep it with you always and nothing can harm it."

Harry looked at the five of them, grateful once again for them all. He smiled broadly and a single tear ran down his cheek. His hands trembled, so Ginny helped him put it on. She kissed him on his neck, causing him to shiver. He looked at the five of them and murmured a thank you.

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### **Malfoy...**

Potions class went well that day. They had just finished talking about blood replenishing potions and were starting preparations for the next potion they'd be making, a very difficult antidote to dragon venom. Harry packed his books into his bag and turned to follow Ron and Hermione out the door.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise and Harry felt himself flung violently into the wall. His bag went spinning in another direction, spilling books as it went. As Harry rose to his feet, groggy and confused, he heard an ugly laugh behind him.

“You always were a clumsy oaf, Potty.”

At the door, Ron and Hermione spun around, whipping their wands to the ready. Malfoy stood there with his arms crossed, Crabbe and Goyle to either side. Harry turned to face him. As the students watched, he seemed to shake off the effects of Malfoy’s curse. Straightening, he seemed to grow before their eyes, seemingly taller than he was. Eyes glowing with an intense inner fire, magic radiating off his body in waves, he opened his mouth and...

A low, steely voice spoke from the corner. “You have three seconds. If I see a wand after that, the student who holds it will be scrubbing the dungeon floor with his or her toothbrush every night until the end of the year.”

Professor Serena Snape had seen the whole thing from the corner of the classroom and she knew she had to put a stop to this now, before it got out of hand.

As Ron and Hermione quickly hid their wands, Harry spun on his heels towards Serena. She could feel him wrestle with his emotions, and watched as he closed his eyes, employing several meditative techniques to center himself.

*Merlin the power of that boy! He’s learning to control it; he fought it as soon as I spoke. But Merlin! I’ve never seen anything like it.* She thought. *Ok, first to clear up this little mess.*

“Mr. Malfoy,” she continued quietly, “you have 30 seconds to explain your actions. Why did you cast the Explicio curse at Mr. Potter?”

Draco sputtered a moment, and then said, “I was defending myself Professor. He was going to cast a curse at me.”

Gliding towards Malfoy, she raised an eyebrow at his excuse. “Interesting, Mr. Malfoy. So you would have me believe that, not only was Mr. Potter going to curse you, but he was going to do so wandlessly, and with his back to you?”

Crabbe and Goyle nodded vigorously like this was a most logical explanation. Malfoy looked confused. He was a Slytherin after all. Professor Snape’s husband was his Head of House. Surely she wouldn’t side with Potter!

*Crabbe and Goyle are fools. Draco’s the dangerous one,* she thought. *He’s so like his father. I wonder if he’s taken the mark yet? If he hasn’t, he probably will soon.*

“Fifty points from Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy, for casting the curse.”

“But...” Draco began.

“And another fifty points,” Professor Snape said, her voice overriding him, “for such an obvious lie. You’re a Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy. Lying is something you should have learned to do well in your first year.”

“But Professor...” Draco tried again.

“I’m not finished, Mr. Malfoy,” Serena stopped him once again. “Along with the house points, you will have two weeks detention. One week with Mr. Filch who, I’m sure, will welcome your help in cleaning out the boys toilets. When you’re done with that, you will spend another week of detention with Professor Hagrid who, I understand, is one of your favorite teachers.”

At Malfoy’s stunned expression, Serena’s lips quirked into a half smile. “Was there anything else, Mr. Malfoy?”

“No, Professor,” Draco said sulkily.

“Excellent. With time, you will discover that I do not allow any foolishness in this class. My husband may have shown a preference for Slytherin House, but I do not. All of my students receive the same treatment here, Mr. Malfoy. Now, get out of my sight.”

Ron and Hermione gaped at Professor Snape; it was unheard of! And she was married to the head of Slytherin House! Harry seemed oblivious to it all, as he stood with his eyes closed and his hands fisted at his sides.

Malfoy shot Serena a murderous look and stormed from the room, followed by a gawking Crabbe and Goyle. Ron picked up Harry’s bag and started to collect the scattered books and parchments. Hermione and Serena both approached Harry. His eyes snapped open; the fire in them flickered once and went out. He wearily walked to a nearby chair and sat down. Ron walked over and handed him his bag.

“Thanks, mate.”

“No problem, Harry.”

Serena took in Harry’s pale appearance and drained look. “How are you feeling Harry?”

Harry looked up at her with a wry grin and said, “Like I’ve been thrown into a wall... achy...”

She walked over to a cabinet and pulled out a small potion. Walking back, she handed it to him and said, “Fortunately for you, this is a potions lab. This will help with those aches. I don’t suppose I need warn you to watch yourself around Malfoy, Harry?”

Harry downed the potion, and then said, “No professor. I’ve been dealing with him for six years now, and I just made a mistake of turning my back on him today. I guess I’m still tired from Hogsmeade. Normally I don’t make mistakes like that.”

“Alright Harry, why don’t you and your friends head off to your next class? If your teacher gives you any problems about being late, tell them to speak to me about it.”

The three of them nodded and left the room. Serena returned to her desk. Pulling her chair out, she noticed a notebook under it. Bending down, she picked up the notebook and sat down. Opening it, she found ‘HJ Potter’ inscribed on the inside.

*It must have skidded under the desk when his bag went flying. I'll get it back to him at lunch, she thought, flipping through it. The notebook seemed to be a combination of homework, personal thoughts and doodles.*

She stopped suddenly and grinned. On the page before her, Harry had written the same name in various ways, all over the page.

*Ginny. Ginny Weasley. Ginny Potter. Ginevra Potter. Ginevra Weasley-Potter.*

Shaking her head at the text before her, she turned a few more pages before stopping again with a frown. The new page was a little disturbing. It was filled with a few doodles, but the writing is what drew her notice:

Scar hurts. Bleeding. 'He will mark him as his equal'. Pain. Must be a way. 'Neither can live while the other survives'. Yes, but how?

Concerned now, she turned back to the beginning of the notebook, and went page by page. The first few pages seemed to be notes on different types of binding charms. *Perhaps for Flitwick's class*, she thought.

Skiping the doodles about Ginny, and the more disturbing text, she found more doodles. *A Quidditch field, Harry's Firebolt, a few geometric shapes*, she thought. *What's this? Jewelry patterns? Interesting.*

Turning a few more pages, she stopped again. *An essay perhaps*, she told herself. Her brow furrowed in concentration as she read:

*"The Protean Charm:  
How it can be modified through the use of crystalline structures  
as foci for alteration of the bond."  
By H. Potter*

*The Protean Charm as used by Voldemort actually has multiple modes, which can be accessible beyond the originator of the spell. Research into earlier versions of the Protean charm seem to indicate that the version currently in use is a corruption of a much more advanced and significantly older charm "Protea maxima dulcet lux". That original spell contained many modes of operation far beyond what is currently employed. My preliminary studies suggest that those modes of operation are still available in this corrupted version used by Voldemort. I do not believe Voldemort is capable of accessing these modes of operation or perhaps is unaware of them. Some additional modes include, but are not limited to,*

*Local summoning.*

*Awareness transference.*

*Attack mode, which assaults anyone carrying the mark (V. Uses a minor variant of this to summon his minions).*

*Removal of the charm.*

*It is my belief that knowledge of these modes may be useful in the coming war...*

Serena blinked in disbelief. What the hell had she just read? The Dark Mark could be removed?

*Calmly*, she told herself firmly. *Perhaps I read it wrong*. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she read it through again. Once finished, she raised a shaking hand to her neck, trying to ease suddenly tense muscles.

She knew about the Dark Mark of course. Severus had carried it for years. Even though he could no longer function as a spy, he could still feel the summons of Voldemort through it, and it caused him intense pain. She had spoken to Severus extensively about the mark, researched it as thoroughly as possible, and always hit the same dead end. Between the two of them, they had both concluded that there was nothing to be done. She hated watching her husband suffer on those nights when the mark burned a livid red and knew she would do anything...*anything at all* to rid him of it.

Turning back to the notebook, she flipped through it frantically. This was way over her head! There were detailed diagrams of crystalline structures used to modify the magical bond. More notes on the Protean charm and...

She froze. One phrase leapt off the page in front of her and she felt like she'd been kicked in the stomach.

***Removal of a Protean Mark is possible by use of two crystalline amplifiers.***

*Removal of a Protean Mark is possible by use of two of crystalline amplifiers. Emerald and Diamond would be best, as they have the strongest matrices and can withstand the power flowing through them. Removal is not something to suggest lightly. Since it would be impossible to correctly duplicate Voldemort's power, the task will have to be accomplished by overpowering the mark. Interestingly enough, I believe that this will result in the mark transferring back to Voldemort in a most painful manner. It should be noted that there are elements of risk to both the owner of the mark and the person(s) attempting the removal.*

Serena jumped to her feet, grabbed the edge of the desk for support and stared down at the notebook in shock. The mark could be removed! Letting go of the desk, she swayed slightly, lightheaded.

Oh Merlin! The mark can be removed. I need to talk to Harry! No, Minerva must know! And wait until Severus hears...SEVERUS! I need to talk to Severus first.

Serena's head jerked up as the students for her next class filed in. Grabbing Harry's notebook, she shoved it into a drawer and smoothed her hands down her robes. She still had classes to get through today. Trying to calm her racing heart, she stepped out from behind her desk to start the class on their assignment.

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### **Lunch that same day...**

Harry was sitting with Ginny and the others at the Gryffindor table. He had finished eating and decided he wanted to check something from his notebook while the others were busily conversing. He started rooting around in his bag looking for it. Slowly, a sense of panic started to build in him.

The book wasn't in the bag! Harry put the bag on the table and looked around on the floor. Maybe it had fallen out of the bag?

Harry felt his sense of panic rising. The potions lab! Without saying a word he bolted from the table and ran from the Great Hall, leaving his friends worried and bewildered.

At the head table, Serena noticed Harry's exit and thought. *Oh dear, I suppose I should have mentioned something to him.*

Harry ran down to the potions classroom in the dungeons and frantically began to search for the book. He looked under the desks; he checked cauldrons, behind one of the ingredient cabinets. He was in a full-blown panic now. Without even considering what he was doing, he ran all the way up to the Gryffindor Tower and tore his trunk apart, hurling stuff everywhere, trying to find the book. Defeated, he left the mess behind and walked back down to the Great Hall to rejoin his friends. As he entered, dozens of eyes turned his way. It didn't matter, he was used to people watching him. He walked numbly back to sit next to Ginny; his shoulders slumped. His notebook was gone, plain and simple.

The three friends watched him, worriedly. Ginny touched him on the arm and asked, "Harry, what's wrong? Why did you run out of here like that?"

"I lost my notebook Ginny. The notebook you saw in the Room of Requirement. I checked the potions class, my trunk and the dorm room." Harry winced in remembrance of the mess he made by his bedside.

Hermione frowned and said, "Harry, I can understand you being upset. But if you need to, I'll let you copy my notes."

Ginny looked at Hermione, her eyes plainly saying 'Don't push this'. Verbally, she simply said, "It's not that kind of notebook, 'Mione."

Hermione took the clue and decided to drop it for now, but she definitely planned on speaking to Ginny about this later.

Harry stared down at the table, clearly upset. There were plenty of things in that book that would be embarrassing if made public. But more importantly, there was work in there that he felt would be hard to recreate without starting from scratch.

Serena could see the impact the loss of his precious book had on Harry and she was truly sorry about that. But this was simply too important to hand it back to him and forget about it. She left the teacher's table and glided over to where Harry was sitting.

"Harry, would you stop by our private quarters this evening after dinner? I believe my husband will want to have words with you at that time."

Harry nodded mutely at the Professor. This was a DISASTER! Snape is probably going to rip him apart for Malfoy's losing 100 points. This was all he needed on top of losing his book!

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## **Snape's Private Quarters, Dinner time...**

Serena paced the living room. She's always thought herself a patient person, but waiting to share her news about Harry's discovery with Severus was unbearable. She was nervous. She could admit that to herself. After researching the Dark Mark and coming to so many dead ends, she was afraid. Afraid this wouldn't work, afraid to build up hope for her husband, only to see that hope burn to the ground in bitter ashes. But he had the right to know, didn't he?

Damn that man! Where is he? Probably gave some poor student detention. Tonight of all nights! I'll strangle him. No, first I'll tell him what I found out, and THEN I'll strangle him. Damn Slytherin! He probably... Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard the door to their quarters open, then close again. Finally, she thought, as she turned to face the doorway, nervous and a little frightened.

Severus walked towards the living room, tired and annoyed. He'd heard multiple complaints from Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle about his wife's actions in the potions classroom today. One hundred points was harsh. Granted, the curse was stupid, but not really worth a hundred points. It was Potter, after all. *The boy probably did something*, he thought, before stopping himself.

I must stop doing that! Potter isn't what I thought he was, and I need to remember that. Besides, who am I trying to fool? Draco's an ass and he's hated Harry from day one. How many times did the little prat sabotage Harry's potions in class? Still, one hundred points is too damn harsh.

He walked into the living room and glanced up in time to see his wife hurtling towards him. He rocked back on his heels with a grunt as she flung herself into his chest. Wrapping his arms around her, he tried to understand what she was saying. Muffled against his chest, words tumbled from her lips.

"Serena? I can't understand a word you're saying. Serena!" Pulling her back from his chest, he looked down at her face and noticed her eyes were brimming with tears. "Serena?" he asked gently. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing! It's just...I have something to tell you! I've debated about this, because I'm not sure how you'll react but..."

"I've already been told, Serena. I think you were a little harsh," he added, misunderstanding.

"Harsh? What are you talking about?"

"One hundred points from Slytherin and two weeks detention? Do you know what I've had to listen to today? Whining from Malfoy and his goons!" He pushed her away and went to pour himself a drink.

She gaped at his back. Malfoy? He's complaining about Malfoy?

"Severus, you don't understand..."

“Of course I understand,” he said, turning from the bar with a glass of brandy in his hand. “So Malfoy acted like a prat. Big deal. He is a prat, in case you didn’t notice. Detention and house points won’t change that!”

“Severus, I don’t want to talk about Malfoy right now, I want...”

“Well I do. I’m the head of Slytherin, Serena. You should have come to me on this.”

“Come to you? What, so you could let the little bastard off with a warning?” She stalked towards him. Stopping inches away from him, her head up, chin jutting out, she radiated prickly anger. A smart man would have backed off by now. But Severus was new to relationships and he didn’t think.

“I would have taken care of it,” he replied before taking a sip from his glass.

“Taken care of it? How dare you imply that I am incapable of taking care of this on my own?” She punctuated this statement with a finger poke to his chest. “Punishment for misbehavior in my class is my business, Severus. So, you’re the head of Slytherin house,” she mocked, poking him in the chest again. “Let me point out just how much I don’t care. You’re precious house is full of miscreants, hell raisers, unintelligent, spoiled little brats!” Another poke to the chest followed. “You’ve been favoring those slimy gits from day one. What on earth makes you think I would blindly follow your lead and do the same?”

As she went to poke him once more, he captured her hand and flattened on his chest. “Serena, I may have worded that wrong...” He tightened his hold on her hand as she tried tugging it away.

“Release me,” she said, icily.

“Serena, we need...”

She kicked him in the shin, hard. Releasing her, he cursed. What the hell was going on here? Rubbing his shin, he watched her stalk away, limping slightly and muttering to herself. Thankfully, he could only hear part of her diatribe.

“...stupid slimy...listen to me for a change...how you could be so dense...”

She picked up a notebook from the coffee table, marched back to him, shoved it under his nose and barked, “Read!”

He took the notebook, glanced at the cover, then back at her face. “Serena, what...”

She pulled her foot back ready to kick him again. New to relationships he may be, but no one ever accused him of being stupid. Shin still throbbing from her first kick, he put his glass down on the bar, opened the notebook and read. HJ Potter.

He glanced back up, noted her dangerous expression, and kept his comment to himself. Flipping through the pages, he paused now and then to read some of the notes. Charms homework. Why am I reading Potter’s notes on his charms homework? What’s the point of...Oh for Merlin’s sake!

He stared at the page before him for a moment and rolled his eyes. Ginny. Ginny Weasley. Ginny Potter...

He showed the page to his wife. "Is there a point to this? I don't really feel like reading through Potter's homework and hormonal ramblings, Serena."

"Just keep reading, you stubborn man!" She ground out.

Damn she's touchy today. What is her problem? Merlin, I hope she's not pregnant! He nearly dropped the notebook at the thought. No, she can't be. I always use the contraceptive charm.

Sighing inwardly, he read through several more pages of notes, doodles and some disturbing comments before he stopped again. What the hell was this?

*"The Protean Charm:  
How it can be modified through the use of crystalline structures  
as foci for alteration of the bond."  
By H. Potter*

After reading the page twice, he moved on. *Diagrams, more notes on the Protean and...* He stiffened, eyes widening in shock.

***Removal of a Protean Mark is possible by use of two crystalline amplifiers.***

Finishing the page, he noticed his hand was trembling. Shaking his head dumbly, he looked up. "Serena?" He whispered questioningly.

"I know," she sighed. Taking the notebook from his loose fingers, she started to pace with it in her hand. Severus moved to the nearest chair and sat down heavily as his wife continued to speak.

"When Harry was hit with that curse this morning, his book bag went flying. Books everywhere! Ronald Weasley picked them up, but the notebook slid under my desk and went unnoticed until I pulled my chair out. At first, I opened it to see whom it belonged to. Once I realized it was Harry's, I was curious. I probably shouldn't have looked, but I couldn't help myself."

"Serena, stop a minute..."

"I've been worried about him. I thought maybe his notebook would give me some clues about his thoughts. When I found what I thought to be homework, I figured I'd give it back to him at lunch."

"Serena..."

"But then I got to the pages about the Protean. Once I realized what I was reading, I was in shock. Shock, Severus! Do you know what..."

"SERENA!" Severus bellowed.

Serena jumped, mid-pace, whirled around and faced her husband. "What?"

“Would you please stand still?” He asked, quietly. “You’re making me dizzy.”

“Dizzy? What are you talking about? Severus, don’t you understand what this means?” And she was off again, pacing and rambling, almost to herself.

For his part, Severus didn’t know what to think. He leaned his elbows on his knees, put his head in his hands and tried to order his thoughts. *Overpowering the mark. Reversing the flow through a matrix? Emerald and Diamond...perhaps...I need to read it again and compare it to...*

Standing, he tried to gain his wife’s attention. “Serena...”

She paced by him, still holding the notebook and talking.

“Serena, I need the...”

She went back the other way, passing in front of him once more.

“Serena, would you please...”

As she went to pass him a third time, he reached out and snatched the notebook from her hand. Ignoring her indignant yelp, he turned to the relevant page and walked over to a bookshelf. Scanning the contents, he finally plucked a book from among the volumes.

Taking both the notebook and the tome to a desk in the corner, he put them down. Flipping through the book, he started muttering to himself.

“I know I saw it. It’s in this book, I’m sure....here! Binding charms.”

Serena watched as her husband compared the text in the notebook to the pages in the book he’d taken from the shelf. As much as she wanted to ask what he was doing, she knew now wasn’t the time. Twisting her hands with nerves and pacing in a small circle, she couldn’t still her racing mind.

*This has to work. Pray Gods please let this work. I know I’m being selfish in thinking of my husband first, but he’s been through enough!* When she saw Severus’ head droop and his shoulders relax, she froze.

“Severus...?”

He turned to face her slowly. Looking into his eyes, she caught her breath.

“Serena...Serena, I think it just might work!”

With a cry, she flung herself into his arms again. Hugging him tight, she started to sob.

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## Harry Arrives...

Harry arrived at Professor Snape's private quarters. He was not a happy person, despite Ginny trying to cheer him up. Even her sitting in his lap and wiggling didn't do much to help. The loss of his book had devastated him.

Knocking, he waited for someone to respond. Professor Severus Snape opened the door and let Harry enter the apartment.

When Harry entered the living room, he noticed Professor Serena Snape standing in front of the fireplace. She motioned for him to take a seat and said, "Hello Harry, it's good to see you."

Severus glanced at his wife, amazed. A moment before, she had been sobbing in his arms. Now, she was calm and composed, all evidence of her emotional upheaval missing from her face and demeanor. *Worthy of a Slytherin, that one is*, he thought to himself.

Harry's immediate thought was a simple one. *I'm about to get nailed by two Professors? Can this day get any worse?*

Professor Severus Snape took up a position next to his wife.

Harry looked at the two carefully. Whatever was coming, he was sure it wasn't going to be enjoyable.

Serena noticed how tense Harry was and decided to see if she could calm him a bit before they even brought up the book. She moved from the fireplace to sit next to Harry on the couch. Placing a hand on his arm, she couldn't help but notice how stiff and tense he was.

"Harry, relax. We're not here to yell at you, and you're not in trouble."

Harry looked between the two, bewildered. If he wasn't in trouble, then why was he here?

Serena started again.

"Harry, after today's little problem in potions, I found a notebook. When I opened it to find out who it belonged to, I was extremely surprised at what I discovered inside."

Harry stiffened. "You found my notebook? You read my notebook?"

"Yes Harry. I'm sorry for violating your privacy like that, but certain items in the book caught my eye. That's why I asked you to visit us tonight."

Harry seemed to hunch and pull into himself. In a small voice he prompted her to continue. "Professor?"

Serena leaned in to Harry and said in a low voice. "The Protean charm Harry."

Harry seemed to flinch at that. He said, "I know it's not any good Professor... I didn't really expect anyone to find that... I was just doing some research and jotted notes down... Its not like 'Mione did it. It was just something I was doodling with..."

As Harry continued to babble excuses, Serena rolled her eyes and smiled. Reaching over, she grasped Harry's chin and turned his face towards her. Meeting his eyes, she said, "Harry, listen to me a moment please. I've read through your research. Severus has as well. Neither of us has found a single flaw in it."

Harry's eyes widened, and he whipped his head around to stare at Snape, still standing by the fire.

Seeing his look, Severus nodded. "She's right Harry. There's nothing wrong with your conclusions. In fact, the monograph you've written is one of the best I've seen. There are wizards that have years of experience in charms research who would have trouble understanding it. I'm not sure even I understand it all."

Harry was in shock. This was so out of character for the stern Professor, even the new revised married version of the stern Professor!

Serena, remembering past conversations concerning Harry's self esteem, gently asked him, "Harry, you never planned on showing that to anyone, did you?"

Harry looked down at the carpet and was silent for a moment before answering "No Professor."

Severus stepped forward, pulled one of the armchairs around to face Harry and sat down. Leaning forward, Severus looked at the slight young wizard and said softly, "I'm glad we got to see that Harry."

Harry raised his head and searched Snape's face for some sense of mockery or deceit. He stared long and hard but could see nothing except a sense of sadness and, perhaps, hope.

Severus continued speaking in a soft tone. "Harry, for more than 16 years now I have searched for a potion, a charm, some way of affecting the mark; some way to remove it. This past summer, Serena went over my research, and even started several lines I hadn't considered. We found nothing. And now you come along with a way of freeing me. Freeing me from the pain it causes me. I'm no use to the Order anymore. Voldemort knows I was a spy, that's why I can no longer leave Hogwarts. I'm a prisoner in this school because he can track me if I leave. With the mark gone, I might be of use again."

Harry looked between the two again. Serena looked hopeful, Severus held his breath. Harry chuckled sadly and said, "It's ironic that all this started because, like you Professor, I wanted to be free of the pain; the pain that Voldemort can still cause me through this scar."

Harry leaned back and debated with himself. *Should I trust them? Can I trust them? I'm not sure! Oh Merlin I wish I had someone to tell me what to do!*

At that point Harry's locket shuddered against his chest and emitted a small, comforting warmth against his breastbone. Harry's turmoil eased and he came to a decision. He smiled and sent a mental thanks to his family.

Harry looked at the two Professors and said shyly, “There is an easy way, Professor, to see if my theory is correct. I never got the chance to test it. That was one of the parts I was still working on and I couldn’t see Voldemort allowing me to accept the mark just so I could experiment on myself.”

Serena gasped at that, and then started to chuckle. Severus went goggle eyed for a moment.

Then, the unthinkable happened. Professor Snape, the menacing Head of Slytherin House, the most feared teacher in Hogwarts, started to laugh. As he pictured Harry asking for the Dark Lord’s help in removing the mark, he laughed even harder.

Harry stared at Severus, his mouth hanging open in shock. Serena, noting Harry’s expression, slid off the couch. Landing on the floor in hysterical giggles, she raised a shaking hand and pointed at Harry’s expression. Harry recovered from his shock and grinned sheepishly at her.

Once everyone had regained their composure, Severus leaned forward anxiously and said, “You can test this easily Harry?”

Serena, once again seated next to Harry on the couch, caught her breath and waiting for his reply.

“Yes Sir. There’s a fairly easy way of testing it and no one will notice the link being activated. It will require me to produce the correct matrix of crystals, but that’s fairly easy...” He became hesitant again. “I’m afraid I’ll have to show you an ability I’ve been hiding from most everyone here though.”

Serena was confused, thinking he meant his animagus form. For the life of her, she couldn’t see how a phoenix would help in this. Her train of thought derailed as Harry continued speaking.

“I’ll need to make a matrix that will be a mix of blue Tourmaline and Moonstone and then charge the matrix. Once it’s charged, it should cause your mark to glow a painless blue. If that works, everything else should work, Sir.”

“Can you do it here? Now? What do you need?”

“Well Sir, its unfortunate you’re not my Ginny, because I’ll need you to remove your shirt so we can see the mark.” He said with a smirk. Serena laughed and Severus rolled his eyes.

“While you’re doing that, I can make what I need,” Harry finished.

As Severus unbuttoned his shirt, he glanced at Serena, who was looking at Harry in shock. Looking at Harry, he gaped.

Harry sat on the couch with his eyes closed; his hands turned, palms up. Both hands seemed to pulsate with a soft white glow. Above each palm, a series of sparks appeared for a moment, each flashing inward to a central point. As each spark reached the center it vanished, leaving a small piece behind.

Eventually, two stones floated above each palm. Both stones were about an inch in diameter. After the stones were formed, Harry turned his palms inward to face each other and the stones

floated lazily together. They touched, and where they met, a bright line appeared as the two stones fused together. Slowly, the glow faded from his left hand and, as Harry opened his eyes, the fused stone fell into his right.

Serena stared at Harry. Severus croaked “How long...”

Harry looked at Severus. “Wandless magic?”

Severus nodded.

“Since early summer, Sir.”

Severus collapsed back into the armchair. “Incredible!”

The wandless magic was impressive. But just as impressive was the fact that Harry wasn’t just conjuring gemstones; he was building them, shaping them to his precise needs.

Serena collected her thoughts and tried to get them back on track.

“Harry, what do we do next?”

Harry looked at Serena puzzled for a moment, and then realized what she was talking about.

“Oh right, this is easy. I’ll charge the Moonstone side of the matrix. Once it hits a critical point, the energy will flow to the Tourmaline and exit as a thin beam. As long as Professor Snape gets hit by the beam, it should cause his mark to glow.”

Harry turned to Severus; he seemed to hesitate.

“I’m pretty sure this will be painless Sir. Are you sure you want to try this?”

Severus had a predatory gleam in his eye. “Lets do it!”

“Yes Sir. It will only take a moment to charge the matrix.”

Harry levitated the stone and twisted it so that the tourmaline side was pointing at Severus. One of his hands glowed that soft white again and a broad beam of light hit the stone. The stone seemed to suck up the energy without any effect until suddenly, a pencil thin beam of blue light erupted from the Tourmaline, hitting Severus in the chest.

Severus gasped and shuddered, saying, “Bugger that’s cold!” Then his jaw dropped open as he noticed his mark.

Serena’s eyes widened at Severus’s Dark Mark began to pulsate with a soft blue light.

Harry leapt to his feet, cutting off the beam, and shouted, “YES! It worked!”

Severus leaned back in his chair with a startled look on his face. Then he murmured. “Bugger me! It really did glow!”



Serena leapt to her feet and grabbed Harry in a hug. Harry took on an embarrassed air.

There was a moment of silence as they all settled back in their seats. Serena said softly to Harry, “You see, your research was correct.”

Harry nodded and then asked the one question they all were pondering at the same time. “Where do we go from here?”

Severus looked thoughtful, then finally said, “I think the next step would be to examine your other suppositions in detail. As much as I want this mark removed, I don’t think we should rush into this. I will say however, I am greatly encouraged Harry. So much so that I think I’m going to award you 100 points to Gryffindor and take another 50 from Slytherin!”

Serena gaped at Severus. “Your kidding right? Your not going to take another 50 points from Slytherin, are you?”

Severus rolled his eyes at her. “Of course I’m not going to take points from my own house. But I’ll let the 100 points stand.”

Harry clasped his hands to his head and murmured, “A Joke! I can’t take this, he made a joke!”

Severus smirked his patented smirk, then turned serious again. “Harry, I know what this book means to you, but I’d like your permission to copy it so I can study what you’ve put together. I will be discrete with it, but I should warn you I may have to show this to the Headmaster and others.”

Harry winced at that, then sighed and nodded an affirmative. Severus replicated the book with a quick spell, and handed Harry back his original copy.

“I’m not very comfortable with the Headmaster knowing this, Sir. To be honest, I don’t think I can trust him much anymore. And it would reveal abilities I don’t want revealed yet. But if you really think this is useful, then I’ll trust your judgment on the matter.”

Serena got a thoughtful look on her face and decided this was something she needed to ask. “Harry, considering all of the history between yourself and my husband, why did you suddenly decide to trust us with the knowledge of your abilities?”

“Professor, someday when this war is over and Voldemort is gone, we’ll sit down over a nice dinner and I’ll explain. But for now, let’s just say I received confirmation from an unimpeachable authority and leave it that, ok?”

Serena hated secrets, but she really had no choice but to comply. This time. *This young man has as many secrets as a Slytherin!* She thought.

Severus watched the exchange silently, his mind whirling with possibilities. Suddenly, one clear thought popped to the forefront, and for him it was an epiphany of sorts.

*Harry Potter may look like James Potter, but he’s really more like Lily than his father!*

Serena put an arm around Harry's shoulder and walked him to the door. "Thank you, Harry," she said quietly. "You don't know how much this means...to both of us."

"You're welcome, Professor." Harry said, embarrassed. "Goodnight."

As the door closed behind him, Harry shook his head. Snape smiling? Making a joke? Once the shock wore off, he intended to make sure the world was still spinning. At this point, he wasn't even sure if the sun would rise tomorrow!

Serena walked into the living room, weary from the night's discoveries. Smiling at Severus, she walked towards him.

Moving cat quick, Severus lunged at her, wrapped his arms around her waist and swung her around in circles, laughing.

"It's going to work, Serena! I just know it's going to work!"

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### **Gryffindor Tower, Girl's Dorm...**

Later that evening in the Gryffindor's girl's dorm, Hermione joined Ginny in her bed space. Ginny looked up from painting her toenails.

"Mione?"

"Ginny, what's the story about this book of Harry's? He returned from that meeting with Professors Snape and he was mortally embarrassed, scared, relieved and pleased with himself. What's so important about this notebook?"

Ginny looked thoughtful for a moment then started talking.

"Last Friday night, I snuck into the Room of Requirement, looking for Harry. I figured he was training again. But he wasn't. He was seated at a table surrounded by books. He was pouring over a very old book and making notes in his notebook. I didn't see much of the book 'Mione, but what I saw was so far over my head I could barely understand every third word. He's been researching the Protean charm and, apparently, has made a breakthrough on it. He's figured out how to affect that particular magical bond." As she spoke she couldn't help but allow a note of pride creep into her voice.

Hermione was stunned. Harry made a breakthrough in something? Ok, that really wasn't fair to Harry, but he never struck her as being willing to study or research anything. Hermione was so lost in thought it took her a minute to realize that Ginny was sitting there frowning at her.

Hermione put a hand on Ginny's arm.

"I'm sorry Ginny. I guess it was just a shock to me, hearing that Harry was doing some research. What do you think the odds are that he'll allow me to look at it?"

Ginny blushed and said, "I'm not sure he will 'Mione. Like I said, there was a lot of material in that book, but some of it was pretty personal. I'm afraid he'd be too embarrassed to show it to you." She giggled and continued. "I didn't say anything to Harry at the time, but he had one full page that I spotted that just kept saying 'Ginny Potter' over and over again."

Hermione gave Ginny a questioning look. Ginny blushed, then sighed and said, "No, not for the lack of opportunity or willingness on my part. He wants it to be perfect the first time." Both girls sighed at that.

Hermione considered for a moment. People tended to marry early in the wizarding world. It was actually unusual for wizards and witches to wait until their mid twenties to get married. Harry knew that, since he knew his parents had been married just out of school. She wondered if he knew about some of the other aspects of the wizarding world.

Ginny looked at Hermione, she had that 'I'm in deep thought mode' at the moment. Hermione noticed her look and said, "Oh, I'm just wondering how much Harry understands our world. I know some of the wizarding ways seem strange to me, being raised by muggle parents, but Harry didn't even have that luxury. Maybe it's time we educate him?" She said with a wicked grin.

### **Hogwarts Headmaster's Office, late evening...**

Serena and Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall entered the Headmaster's office and took chairs facing the desk. Albus Dumbledore peered over his glasses at the three of them. His eyes rarely twinkled these days.

"Ah, so good of you all to join me tonight. Would anyone care for a lemon drop?"

All three declined. *So much for small talk*, Dumbledore thought. *Oh well, lets see what kind of shock they intend to drop on me.*

"So, what brings you here Professors Snape and Professor McGonagall? Surely it's not about that fight over the Quidditch pitch the other day? I understand Madam Pomfrey will be able to return all of Mr. Goyle's missing limbs?"

Severus coughed politely and said. "Yes Headmaster, Goyle will be fine. That's not why we're here. This is an important matter, worthy of your attention, and it involves yourself and our Mr. Potter."

Dumbledore's only comment was a quiet "Ah."

Minerva tells me you've been made to understand what kind of a mistake you were making, but its important that you start trying to heal the breach between you both. Especially now; Pot... umm... Harry has demonstrated some remarkable abilities and produced an extremely interesting piece of research that may prove invaluable for our side. I know how strained things are between you both, but we need to move forward. What I would like to propose is that we four meet with Harry next week, after you've had a chance to review his research. I assure you Headmaster; you will find not only his research illuminating, but his doodling as well. And, as much as I'd hate admit this, it might not be a bad idea to give Miss Granger a copy of this book, or at least a scroll of the relevant section, and have her attend."

Severus paused for a moment, then finally added, "It might even be valuable to include Professor Flitwick, since this is his area of expertise. But I'll leave that up to you to decide, Headmaster."

Albus leaned back in his chair and considered the three of them carefully. He was surprised that Severus was speaking of Harry in such a familiar fashion, and more than a little wistful because it sounded like Severus was developing a relationship with Harry similar to the one he had ruined.

"I have wanted to heal the breach between us Severus. Merlin knows how stupid I acted, and it's not something I'm proud of. I am almost frightened to meet with him again. You'll note that I did not visit him during his last infirmary stay. I'm not sure how to approach him at this point."

Serena spoke up. "Headmaster, if I may offer a suggestion?"

Albus nodded for her to continue.

"I have plenty of experience of late with extremely stubborn men, and Harry is one of the most stubborn I've met. If you sit waiting for him to come to you, you will end up waiting forever. This is important to me, personally and professionally. As Harry's teacher, I know that the road to his recovery must be taken in very small steps. One of which, is healing the breach with you. Harry's research will have a deep impact on myself personally as well, but that's a side issue. My principle concern is that Harry continues to recover from years of physical and emotional abuse. I'm not going to dredge up past pains here; my point is a simple one. Harry needs to build confidence, something he sadly lacks, and he needs your help. Your job, Headmaster, your great task, is to see Harry as Harry. A young man who is just learning to love and be loved, not as the Boy-Who-Lived, but as Harry, a young man who knows little of our world beyond these walls and has little experience with it.

Harry came up with a theory, worked out all the details at a level far beyond what Hogwarts provides. But because he has so little confidence in himself, he had no plans of showing it to anyone. It was pure chance that I learned of it."

Albus nodded thoughtfully, then said, "I can only try Serena. Set up a meeting for Monday and I will review his book over the weekend. Serena, will you see that Miss Granger gets a copy as well? I would suggest we meet elsewhere, however. Meeting here would probably only make Harry uncomfortable. I daresay he has few fond memories of this office."

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### **The Halloween Ball...**

Harry tugged on his new robes for what seemed the twentieth time that evening. The robes were a deep forest green and, while they'd seemed comfortable in the store, the alterations made after he'd left seemed to leave them a little on the tight side.

Seamus and Neville had been ready for a while now and both were watching Harry with amusement. Harry tugged at his robe and pulled, but no matter what he did, his shoulders till looked overly large. The fit wasn't tight, but the top of the robe could be described as 'snug', and it seemed to accentuate the fact that Harry had been doing a lot of training in the past few months.

Walking over to his trunk, he pulled out the robe he'd worn for the TriWizard ball two years go. He was seriously considering wearing it instead when his locket thumped against his chest and flashed hot. With a sigh, he put the other robe back in his trunk and went to look in the mirror.

"You look nice dear, but can't you do something about the hair?" asked the mirror.

Harry tried smoothing it down but he knew that was hopeless. He turned from the mirror and walked back to his bed, then returned to the mirror. He shouldn't be nervous. Ginny and he had been on dates before. But this was a formal ball, and that made all the difference in the world in his eyes.

Seamus, who was currently dating Lavender, snickered as he watched Harry pace around. Ron was amused and Neville, whose relationship with Luna had only just begun, took heart from Harry's nervousness. Finally, Ron couldn't stand it anymore and had to say something.

"Look at this. He can face down a Hungarian Horntail, fight Dementors, battle the occasional Dark Lord, but make him go to a formal dance and he goes to pieces!"

Harry shot Ron a venomous look, which quickly turned into a protesting one as Ron, Seamus and Neville grabbed him by the arms and trotted him down the stairs, ignoring his weak protests that he wasn't ready.

Down in the Common Room, Colin Creevey had set up his camera to take photos. The boys were all clustered together near the fireplace, waiting for the girls to make their appearance. Some of the boys who had dates with girls from other houses left the room. Those that remained huddled together for protection.

Suddenly, Harry had a sickening thought that made his stomach churn. This reminded him of a show he had watched on Jack's TV. It had been a nature show about food production and showed how animals are penned in before going to the market to be slaughtered. It was very morbid.

There was a motion from the girl's staircase and the group took a collective breath and stepped back. The girls started coming down in ones and twos and the appropriate guy moved forward bravely to meet his fate. As couples paired off, they got into a short line and Colin would snap a few photos for each couple. Earlier in the week, Harry had organized the guys and paid for Colin to get plenty of blank film. Now, Harry wasn't sure it was such a good idea.

Turning to Ron, thinking he might be able to provide some moral support, Harry noted he had turned whiter than usual and seemed to be trembling slightly. *Nope, no moral support to be found there*, Harry thought. The only one from his year who seemed comfortable was Seamus, and he was having too much fun teasing his mates.

Harry and Ron didn't see Ginny and Hermione come down the staircase; both were busy looking for escape routes. The girl's were off the stairway and walking towards them when Ron and Harry noticed them.

Harry's jaw dropped open and he couldn't help but shiver. She was beautiful! Her robe was silver and if his robe was snug, hers had been painted to her body until it flared out at the hips! He swallowed nervously. Ginny reached out to take his hand. She smiled at him.

Harry tried to stammer out something, anything!

“Gin... you’re... I mean... pretty... no... more... beautiful... no... more...”

She carefully leaned up on her toes and kissed him on his cheek saying, “Thank you Harry. You look quiet handsome yourself.”

Her words made him blush. He vaguely wondered if he glowed in the dim common room. A detached portion of his mind noticed that his hands trembled. Then Ginny smiled at him, and his mind went blank as he just stared at her.

Seeing his shell-shocked expression, Ginny had a hard time not laughing at him. Taking in his appearance, she made a mental note to thank the witch at Gladrags for the fine alterations. His robe emphasized the breadth of his shoulders and strong, leanly muscled chest. Realizing she’d been repeatedly licking her lips, she shook her head. Squeezing his hand, she turned them both towards Ron and Hermione.

Seeing his friends seemed to snap Harry out of his daze. Obviously, his experience with Ginny had gone better than Ron’s with Hermione. At least Harry and Ginny had managed to talk to each other!

Ron, dressed in his deep midnight blue robe, and Hermione, in a shimmering gold, were staring at each other as if they were both afraid to move or say anything. As Ginny and Harry snickered slightly at the sight, Ron broke out of his reverie.

“Merlin ‘Mione, your gorgeous! Not that you aren’t the rest of the time... I mean I think your real pretty all the time... but tonight... wow...”

Ron would have probably rambled on all night, but Hermione reached up and placed a finger on his lips, halting him. The two grinned sheepishly at each other and Ron reached out to take her hand.

The two couples got in line for their photos. Colin winked at Harry before taking his. Harry began to feel a lot better about this dance.

While waiting for Ron and Hermione to get their photos taken, Harry slipped an arm around Ginny’s waist and pulled her close. He whispered in her ear, “You’re the prettiest girl in the school. How did I get so lucky?” Ginny smiled up at him and leaned into him.

Once the photos were taken, the couples left the common room, heading down to the Great Hall.

In honor of the occasion, the Hall had been temporarily expanded tonight. The teacher’s table had been replaced with a bandstand, where musical equipment was being set up. Dumbledore had procured the services of a new band for this evening, the Wailing Wizards.

The long house tables had been replaced by smaller tables that would seat five couples. There was more than enough room to dance and move around comfortably. Near the bandstand was a door leading to an enchanted rose garden, where couples could go to spend a few private

moments or cool off from dancing. The Hall was lit by hundreds of Jack-o-Lanterns that floated just above the heads of everyone.

Ginny noticed a number of envious looks from other girls in the school and she inwardly smiled smugly. She tightened her grip on Harry's arm, lifted her chin in a gesture that said, in no uncertain terms, *He's mine, back off!*

They met up with Neville and Luna and started looking for a table. Finding Seamus, Lavender, and another Gryffindor couple already seated, the three couples joined them. Dinner was served and they all sat around enjoying themselves.

Ginny noticed that Harry's nervousness seemed to be back in spades, so she leaned over and asked him. "What's wrong Harry?"

Harry gulped and leaned over to whisper, "I don't know how to dance, Gin. What if I do it wrong? What if you don't enjoy it?"

Ginny had learned to dance by standing on her father's feet when she was little and moving while Arthur and Molly danced. Her parents often danced together. She found it hard to believe that anyone wouldn't know how. But then, her Harry wasn't just anyone. She smoothed the hair on his brow and told him he'd be fine, not to worry.

After dinner was cleared, the band began to play and couples moved from their tables to the dance floor. Harry hesitated for a moment. This was it! The moment of truth! Ginny was looking at him expectantly. And to make matters worse, no one from their table had moved to the dance floor yet!

*Gryffindors charge forward!* He thought, slightly hysterical. Taking a deep breath, he turned in his chair to face Ginny.

"Would you like to dance Gin?"

She smiled up at him and nodded in affirmative. Grabbing her hand, he led her out onto the dance floor. He felt very awkward and clumsy at first, but Ginny smiled encouragingly. Fortunately for her, he had very few missteps and none where her feet were the intended target. After a while, he started to enjoy himself. He wasn't sure he liked the real fast dances, but he knew he loved the slow ones where he could hold Ginny close in his arms.

After a few songs, something began bothering him. Ron and Hermione.

He nudged Ginny and pointed in their direction. She stopped dancing and murmured, "Oh dear." Ron was staring at his water glass and Hermione was looking wistfully at the couples dancing.

"Think we can fix this, Gin?"

"I think so."

The couple made their way over to the table. Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her onto the dance floor. He could hear Ginny having some words with her brother as she pulled him onto the floor.

Hermione looked up at Harry with a sad sort of look in her eye. He pulled her close, then leaned down and whispered, "Don't worry. We'll fix it." This earned him a small smile.

At one point Ginny caught Harry's eye. Ron was dancing with Ginny, but you could see he wasn't enjoying himself. Harry steered Hermione closer to them. Ron and Hermione turned as part of the dance movement and suddenly confronted each other face to face.

Harry grabbed Ron's hand and placed it on Hermione's waist while Ginny grabbed the other and put it in Hermione's hand. The two froze for a moment, and then slowly began to shuffle their feet. The song changed to a slow song and Ron moved close enough to Hermione that she could put her head on his shoulder.

Ginny and Harry danced nearby. Both were amused by the extraordinarily pleased look on Hermione's face, and Ron's look of stunned disbelief.

After half an hour of solid dancing, Ginny and Harry returned to their table for a couple of drinks and a break. Ron and Hermione were still on the dance floor.

Ginny giggled. As Neville and Luna joined them for a break, Ginny leaned over and whispered to Harry, "I don't think 'Mione's going to let him off the floor anytime soon. They missed the first seven or eight songs and she's having too much fun."

After a few more slow songs, a stunned Ron and a very pleased looking Hermione rejoined the group. When Ron turned to ask Harry a question, he noticed his friend smirking at him.

"Well, if it isn't Potty and his Weaselette. Judging by her dress, I'd say she must have turned a few tricks to afford that!"

An icy wind howled through the Great Hall, causing the jack-o-lanterns lights to blow out. Harry stood to face Malfoy and waves of visible magic poured from his body with an eerie luminosity. He clenched his fists at his side, trying to gain control of himself.

Before he could do or say anything however, a steely voice said, "Thirty points from Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy." Serena Snape glided up to the group of students and faced Draco. "I will take another thirty points if I do not hear your apology to Miss Weasley."

As Professor Snape took Draco to task, Harry spun to face the wall. He closed his eyes tightly and desperately thought of his phoenix. He could hear Ginny sobbing at the table, and wanted nothing more than to turn Malfoy into ferret. His lips twitched as he remembered the fake Moody bouncing ferret-Malfoy across the dungeon floor during his fourth year. As the memory took him, he could hear the sweet call of phoenix song.

Turning back to Ginny, he bent low and kissed her tear-stained cheek. Looking up, he noticed Seamus holding back a furious Ron, while Hermione tried to calm him. Catching Ron's eye, Harry winked at him. Ron stopped struggling and gaped.



“I think Ginny’s waiting, Draco,” Harry said quietly.

With clenched teeth, Draco spat, “I apologize for that remark!”

“Oh, very pretty Draco. I think you need to work on that. Perhaps you should try again,” the Professor said, raising an eyebrow at the boy’s incredulous look. It was not a request.

“But Professor…”

“Another thirty points from Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy. This is not a debate and one should never keep a young lady waiting,” Serena drawled.

Staring at his Professor in disbelief, he swallowed hard. He whirled around to face Ginny, clenched his fists and said, “I apologize, Miss Weasley. My remark was rude.”

If the group surrounding Ginny thought Malfoy’s voice sounded strangled, no one commented. The prat had made to apologize, publicly. This was unheard of!

Turning back to face his Professor, he glared at her with a murderous expression. Clenching his teeth, he wisely kept his mouth closed and waited.

“Better, Mr. Malfoy. However, I will be speaking to the Headmaster about removing you as a prefect. You obviously do not have the temperament for the job.” Seeing Draco’s shocked expression, Serena smiled at him. “I would suggest Mr. Malfoy, that if you have any intention of becoming a prefect again, you learn to modify your behavior accordingly. Now, you are dismissed from the dance. You will go directly to your common room and remain there for the night.” With a wave of her hand towards the doorway, she released him from the Great Hall.

When Malfoy turned to leave, Serena moved over to Harry and Ginny and spoke with them quietly. The girl had been devastated by the young man’s remark.

While the Professor’s back was turned, Hermione whipped out her wand, pointed it at Draco’s retreating back and muttered under her breath.

When Ginny started to giggle, Serena turned around. Noticing Ron’s disbelieving expression, she followed his gaze towards the Great Hall entrance. Her eyes widened at the sight before her.

Draco Malfoy, his back to the crowd, was stomping out of the Hall in obvious anger. However, the back of his robe was transparent. And not just his robe! The young man’s small, pale buttocks nearly shone in the darkened hall!

Serena’s lips started to twitch. Hearing the sniggers around her, she started to grin. When Harry started to chuckle, Serena lost it. Falling into a nearby chair, she gave into the hilarity, holding her sides in mirth. As more and more people noticed Draco’s robes, the Hall was filled with the sounds of laughter.

Ron couldn’t believe it. He gawked at Professor Snape’s limp, laughing form. Turning to Hermione, he hissed, “What were you thinking? And doing it in front of a teacher? Hermione!”

Weak with laughter herself, she leaned against Ron for support. Looking up into his shocked face, she whispered, "Oh lighten up, Ronald!"

Blinking in surprise, he started to grin. "Well, that was bloody brilliant of you, 'Mione. The slimy git deserved it."

Hermione smirked and said, "What's really neat is, to Malfoy, his robes are just fine!"

Ron swept Hermione into a bone-crushing hug, laughing with her.

While the other students around the table were laughing and cracking jokes at Malfoy's expense, Serena noticed Harry take Ginny's hand. As the two stood up, Serena caught Harry's eye. Raising an eyebrow in question, Harry smiled and nodded to her, before leading Ginny out of the Great Hall for a stroll in the rose garden.

Once he'd found a secluded spot, Harry turned to face Ginny. Taking both her hands in his, he bent down to look her in the eye. "Are you all right, Gin?"

Receiving a smiling nod in answer, he pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. "I never thought I'd see the day when Hermione would do something like that. And did you see the look on Ron's face? It was perfect!"

Ginny giggled. "I wish Colin could have gotten a picture of it."

Laughing, Harry bent down and leaned his forehead against hers. "Are you sure you're ok?" He asked, searching her eyes.

"Well, there's nothing wrong that a kiss won't fix, Mr. Potter," she said with a grin.

"Shall I go get Malfoy then?" He asked with a smirk.

Ginny pushed herself away from him with a laugh and smacked his arm. "Oh, that's so gross, Harry! I can't believe you said that!"

Chuckling, he grabbed her hand, pulling her close once again. Raising his other hand to her cheek, he leaned close and whispered, "You're mine, Ginny." Closing the distance, he kissed her until her knees went weak.

When Harry broke the kiss, he noticed how cold his chest was. Glancing down, he was surprised to find his robe open. *When had she done that?* Looking at Ginny, seeing the predatory look in her eye as she stared at his chest and the way she kept licking her lips, he groaned. Closing his robe quickly, he grabbed her hand and dragged her back to the dance.

When the call came for the last dance of the night, Harry led Ginny out onto the floor. The song was an old ballad, popular in the wizarding world. Harry held Ginny close to him, her body seeming to mold to his.

Half way through the dance, Harry stopped. Ginny looked up at him curiously. In a low, serious tone he said, "You're very special Ginerva Weasley. I love you so much."

As her eyes widened, he ran one finger along her cheek and kissed her. They stood in the center of the dance floor as other couples pulled back from them. Colin snapped off a photo as one of the teachers pointed.

Harry was surrounded by a soft white glow that, as the crowd watched, slowly enveloped Ginny as well.

Serena sat at her table watching the couple with a bemused look on her face. She reached over and took Severus's hand in her own. She turned and smiled at her husband before looking back to the glowing couple on the dance floor. Severus looked at the couple then at Serena and his lips twitched briefly.

Silence. The music had stopped. Harry looked up, startled. Hermione stood a short distance away, grinning madly at them. Harry wondered why they were in the center of a wide-open space, and why was everyone staring at Ginny and himself. Ginny looked around wondering the same thing. Then both of them blushed, proving to Harry once and for all that the blush bulb can't be blown out.

## **Chapter 7    The Dark Mark.**

### **Professor McGonagall's Office, The Monday following the dance...**

Harry was still walking around in a bit of a blissful daze; the dance with Ginny had gone very well! So when Professor McGonagall asked him to come to her office after breakfast, he wasn't too worried.

Professor McGonagall looked up from her desk as Harry entered; she looked at him as if evaluating him for a moment before speaking.

"Ah, Mr. Potter. Professor Snape told me about your achievement and I can't say I'm surprised. I am a little disappointed that you would wish to hide it from us however. I always suspected you were capable of such excellent work if you'd just apply yourself. And I'm glad to see I was right." Now her tone turned stern. "I strongly applaud your scholarship Mr. Potter, but if you ever hide something like this again I will be most displeased.

Now then, getting to business. Professors Snape have asked that several teachers meet them tonight in their private quarters to discuss your work and how it might possibly be expanded upon. I have no doubt that several people will wish for you to demonstrate your hypothesis. To that end, you will be joining us for dinner, rather than going to the Great Hall. We don't wish to put you on the spot, Mr. Potter, but this is necessary."

"I understand, Professor," Harry replied.

"Good. Now, as you have no class first period, you have two visitors who will be arriving in a few minutes. They will be able to spend some time with you before your class. You may meet them outside the entrance to the Gryffindor tower. Feel free to bring them into the common room if you wish. Off you go."

Harry turned around and started to exit the office when McGonagall called, "Oh, Mr. Potter?"

He turned. “Yes, Professor?”

She looked up from the paper she was grading, sent him a slight smile and said, “Well done, Harry.”

Harry gave her a shy look before turning around once again and leaving the office. He hadn’t taken two steps from the door when Hermione barreled past him, heading into the office. As she passed him, she threw him a quick smile and a breathless “Hi Harry!” before darting through the door.

Shaking his head, Harry headed up to meet his two unknown visitors.

Professor McGonagall looked up as Hermione Granger, one of her favorite students, rushed into the office.

“Miss Granger, please be seated. One of our students has made a rather impressive breakthrough and it’s been suggested that you might be of assistance. Your organizational skills and research capabilities are some of the best we’ve seen in Hogwarts in many years. Rather than give you the entire document however, we’ve decided to give you a copy of the relevant parts. There were certain...umm... embarrassing pieces in the main document.”

“Excuse me Professor, but are you talking about Harry’s book?”

McGonagall eyed her student carefully then added dryly, “I see little escapes your notice, Miss Granger.”

“Oh no, Professor. I only learned about it a few days ago from Ginny. She couldn’t tell me much more than Harry had written something that looked important, but she couldn’t understand it.”

“Important may be an understatement Miss Granger. I’ve read his paper this weekend and, I must say, it’s one of the most interesting things I’ve read in a long time. And it may very well play a pivotal role in our war against Voldemort. Be that as it may, I’ve taken the liberty of producing a copy on this scroll for you to read. You will be expected to attend dinner and a discussion of how to proceed with this information this evening in Professors Snape private quarters. There will be a number of teachers, including the Headmaster and Mr. Potter in attendance.”

Hermione accepted the scroll and unrolled it. It seemed to be at least fifteen feet long. Briefly scanning the title and subsections she looked up in shock at Professor McGonagall, blurting out, “Harry did this!”

McGonagall favored her with a tight smile. “Quite, Miss Granger. Needless to say, I was as shocked by it as you are now. Now, unless you have something else you wish to discuss, you may get to your class.”

Getting up, Hermione clutched her precious scroll and left the room.

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### **Happy news from Remus and Tonks...**

Harry's wait was a short one. Looking down one of the staircases, he saw Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks climbing towards him. Remus looked up and grinned at Harry, then rolled his eyes as Tonks started tugging on his arm to hurry him along. Harry smiled as he gave the password to the fat lady and held the door open for the two of them. Remus entered into the common room followed by Tonks with Harry trailing along behind.

Remus took up a position near the fireplace, still grinning. But before Harry could say a word, Tonks grabbed him and hugged him.

"Tonks.... air... breathe..." He tried to gasp. Tonks released him. He barely had a moment to take a breath and notice that she had tears streaming down her silent face when Remus grabbed him in another bone crushing hug.

"Remus... air... breathe..." This was getting repetitive he thought. Remus stepped back and placed an arm around Harry's shoulders. *WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON HERE?* He thought. Remus steered him over to the couch and sat next to him. Tonks took up position on the other side.

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them, puzzlement written all over his face. Finally Remus began to talk.

"Harry when you came to help me after the attack, you not only healed me, but you cured me as well."

"Well of course I cured you Remus. You were badly hurt and I couldn't let anything happen to you."

"No Harry, you don't understand. Listen to me closely. You healed my wounds, yes. But you also cured my Lycanthropy."

Harry sat back, astonished. *How could that be? Is it possible? He's no longer a werewolf?*

Tonks stepped in softly. "Harry, it was more than the phoenix's healing tears you gave that day. We think you must have somehow fused the healing power of the phoenix with your love for Remus. I don't know what you were thinking when you healed him, but we think that may have had something to do with it."

As Harry stared at Tonks, Remus touched his arm and asked, "Do you remember what you were thinking, Harry?"

Harry turned to look at the fire, frowning. What *had* he been thinking?

"Hogsmeade had been attacked by Dementors. I saw a little girl...she nearly died, Remus. I managed to save her. Then Fred showed up. He was yelling that you'd been injured and needed help. I went to Grimmauld Place and saw you lying there and I thought...I thought I just want it to stop."

“You wanted what to stop, Harry?” Remus asked quietly, noticing the silent tears falling down the boy’s cheek.

“All the pain and suffering, my friends being hurt all the time. I saw you lying there and I wanted it to stop.”

Putting his arm around Harry’s shoulder, Remus pulled him in for a tight hug.

“You saved the girl, Harry,” Tonks said, standing from the couch and moving to kneel between Remus and Harry. “But you also saved Remus. And not just from his injuries. As a werewolf, he wasn’t able to hold a job. He had no means of supporting himself.”

Lifting the boy’s head up and wiping the tears from his cheeks, Remus smiled. “She’s right, you know. As the only cured werewolf on record, I can now find employment. As grateful as I am for that, I’m more grateful because I can now legally marry.”

“Marry?” Harry stammered. He looked down at Tonks. She smiled and held up her left hand. Spotting the ring on her finger, his eyes widened. “It’s about time! Congratulations!” And with that, he launched himself at Tonks, bowling her over. As she shrieked in protest, Remus started laughing.

Picking himself up off the floor, Harry grinned at Tonks slyly. “Does this mean I get to call you ‘Auntie’?”

“If you do, you’ll be The-Boy-Who-Learned-To-Regret-It!” She replied with a mock glare.

Harry turned to Remus and smiled. “I’m so happy for you.”

Standing, Remus pulled him into another hug and said, “Harry, in a perfect world, your father or Sirius would have stood with me when I got married. Since that’s not possible, I would be honored if you would stand with me when we’re wed.” Looking down into the upturned face of James and Lilly’s son, he whispered, “First, you gave me Tonks. Then you gave me a way of sharing my life with her. Neither of us could enjoy that if you weren’t with us.”

“When?” Harry asked.

“Before Christmas,” Remus replied.

Harry tightened his arms around the man briefly before stepping back. “I’d be honored Remus,” he replied simply. Then he smirked.

“What?” Remus asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking. The last of the Marauder’s getting married? Sirius must be howling with laughter. I bet mum’s happy!” Feeling the locket warm, he reached up and touched it through his robe.

The three spent a pleasant time together. Tonks and Remus told him about their plans for the wedding, and who was invited. Harry showed them pictures of him and Ginny from the ball.

Tonks teased him unmercifully, causing the boy to glow a rosy shade of red. Changing the subject, he told them about what Hermione had done to Draco Malfoy. He also explained the prank they'd pulled in the Great Hall, including how they'd pranked their own house to avoid suspicion. Grinning, Tonks shook her head over their creativeness, and Remus roared with laughter.

All too soon it was time for Harry to go to class. After exchanging promises to write, the three split up at the entrance hall.

Later at lunch, Harry told the others about being required to eat dinner at a special meeting that evening. All these late night meetings had eaten into his DA time, but fortunately Ron and the others had taken up the slack admirably. He also told them about Remus and Tonks getting married and how everyone was invited. The group looked stunned but very pleased when he told them that Remus had been cured of his Lycanthropy.

Harry felt a little uncomfortable at lunch because Hermione kept shooting him strange looks. He didn't know what her problem was, but he figured that sooner or later he'd hear about it from her.

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### **Harry and Hermione, early afternoon...**

Harry and Hermione were sitting out in one of the Quidditch stands. Hermione was watching Ron as he put the Gryffindor team through their paces. Harry was reading another old volume he'd had found in the library, getting a bit of fresh air and waiting for Ginny to finish her Care of Magical Creatures class.

Every so often, Hermione would give Harry one of those looks again and to be honest, it was beginning to get on Harry's nerves.

*Might as well get this over with*, he thought.

"Mione?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"You've been giving me these funny looks ever since lunch. Do I have floppy ears or something? Or do you have something you want to say to me?"

Hermione turned to face Harry.

"Harry, Professor McGonagall called me into her office this morning. She gave me a copy of something you wrote..." Seeing his stricken look, she hurriedly added, "... Not the whole book Harry. Just the important part."

Harry gulped nervously and nodded.

"I'm just curious Harry. For six years now you and Ron have copied my notes, checked your homework with mine, even asked me for help with extra tutoring on occasion. When I started to

read the scroll Professor McGonagall gave me, I realized that you didn't really need my help all those years Harry... did you?"

*This wasn't what I expected. I thought she'd be upset that I had done something without her help.*

"Mione, ever since our first year, I've needed your help. In some ways, you and I are quite alike. We both grew up as muggles. I'll always need you, 'Mione. There's so much about our world I don't understand. Ron and Ginny are the lucky ones. None of this stuff is new to them. There are customs and traditions I have no clue about. Heck, I barely know what's in the muggle world. It's not easy when you spent the first ten years of your life in a cupboard." He sighed and looked down at his hands before continuing.

"The scroll that Professor McGonagall gave you is the result of over two months of reading and writing. You could have done it in a week without breaking a sweat. Honestly, I don't understand all the fuss. It was something I really wasn't planning on showing anyone anyway and I hate the fuss everyone is making about it. There's probably some huge mistake in there somewhere that will make the whole thing collapse..."

Hermione stopped him with a touch on his arm. He looked up at her.

"You're too hard on yourself. All right yes, I was a little hurt that you didn't ask for my help. But after six years of helping you do research, can you blame me? I was also surprised with the information you managed to put together. It's brilliant, Harry."

"You're not mad then?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Of course I'm not mad. I always knew you were a powerful wizard. But it's nice to know my brother is also smart...when he wants to be." She grinned impishly before adding, "Almost as smart as me!"

At his mock scowl, Hermione leaned over and hugged him.

Hugging her back, Harry thought, *did Hermione really just call me smart? And does this mean I can't check her transfiguration notes anymore?*

"Oy, Potter! Get your hands off my girlfriend!"

Pushing Hermione's bushy brown hair out of the way, he saw Ron hovering not far from where they sat. As Hermione pulled away from him, Harry shouted "Ron, look out!"

Whipping around, Ron dodged a bludger and shook his fist at one of the Gryffindor beaters. Wave to Harry and Hermione, he raced back out to oversee the team.

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### **Dinner with the Snapes...**

As the meeting time approached, Harry began to dread it more and more. He had some time off before dinner, so he decided spend it in the Room of Requirement, dueling. After a short grueling



session that included more than a few cutting hexes getting through his shields, he ran up to his dorm for a quick shower before heading back down to the dungeons.

When he reached the apartment, he glanced at his watch. *Great, I'm late. This is all I need!* Scowling, he knocked on the door and waited.

Glancing up when the door opened, he was met by a smiling Serena Snape. She welcomed him warmly and invited him in.

Harry walked into the room and stopped in surprise. The Snape's living room had been transformed; it was larger and seemed to be filled with people! Hermione rushed over to him and grabbed his arm.

"Harry, we've all been waiting for you. Come on!"

He allowed her to drag him towards a chair at the table. As people started to find chairs, he noticed the Headmaster seated at the head of the table. Serena sat next to Harry and Severus sat across from him. Hermione was on his other side. Professors McGonagall and Flitwick took the last two seats.

Harry felt a twinge of panic. Hermione, seeing the look in his eyes, reached under the table and gave his hand a quick squeeze for reassurance.

After Dumbledore issued his customary "tuck in", the table filled with food. Harry found himself unable to eat. He could feel his panic rising and sweat beaded his brow. Hermione looked at him with concern, but it was Serena that helped him snap out of it.

Serena noticed that Harry was showing all the signs of an oncoming panic attack. She touched his arm and told him to use his meditative methods to center himself. Harry closed his eyes and concentrated on his phoenix song.

With the song running through his head, he managed to relax enough to enjoy the meal. He even managed to talk with Serena and Hermione, mostly about inconsequential stuff, much to Hermione's annoyance. She wanted to talk about his work, but he kept turning the topic. She couldn't make a fuss over it though. Not in front of the teachers.

After dinner ended and the table was cleared, the Headmaster coughed to draw everyone's attention. Dumbledore looked embarrassed, but began to speak to Harry.

"Harry, the only thing worse than a fool is an old fool. I've made many mistakes in regard to you, as so many people here tonight have been so kind to tell me. And I dare say some of the more pointed footprints on my behind may fade eventually." His eyes twinkled slightly at that, then he continued.

"I was wrong to interfere with your relationship Harry. I was wrong in thinking I knew what needed to be done better than you. In my zeal to see you prepared for what will come, I found myself not only trying to run your life, but preventing you from enjoying it. I'm sorry for the pain I've caused you. I can only pray you'll forgive this old fool enough to at least allow me to work with you again."

Everyone turned to look at Harry. Briefly, he considered throwing another fit, but even he had gotten tired of all the tension caused by his break with the Headmaster. He closed his eyes for a moment listening again to his calming song. Then he looked at the Headmaster and spoke in a neutral tone.

“Headmaster, we have a lot of issues to resolve between us. Perhaps someday we’ll truly resolve them. But for now, I’m willing to work with you on this, so long as you treat me as a person and not just some tool. I’m tired of the fighting. We have an enemy that profits from it while we run around in circles, accomplishing nothing.”

There was a collective sigh from all those present. It wasn’t an offer of friendship, and it was conditional, but it was an offer to end the fighting. Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled and he sat straighter in his seat. Nodding, he smiled at Harry.

“You’ve grown considerably in the past few months Harry and I am continually astounded by your capacity to reach out to others. Very well then, I accept your conditions. While the Ministry and others might not agree with me, from here on, I will treat you like what you are. A young but fully mature wizard.

“Now then, before we start talking about your work, let me assure you that Professors Flitwick and McGonagall and Miss Granger have only read a copy of the relevant portion of your notebook, not the entire book. So your other secrets are still safe...”

Harry leaned back in relief. He didn’t want everyone in the room to see his doodles about Ginny. It was bad enough that some of the people here had seen them. Sitting back up, he turned to listen to what Dumbledore was saying.

“... astounded by what I had read Harry. The work is clearly one of the finest I have seen from a student here at Hogwarts. And its implications are nothing short of fascinating to our efforts. In order to simplify things however, I think it might be best if we break our efforts into pieces with several people handling each task. Harry do you have any ideas as to how we should proceed?”

Clearly this was more than a test of their ceasefire. It was his way of showing everyone that he meant what he said and intended to ask for Harry’s input as an equal.

Harry thought it over carefully before speaking. “Sir, since Professor Snape is the only one here with a mark to test on, and I’m probably the only one capable of powering the crystals, I’d suggest that Professors Snape, you and I handle the practical aspects, while Professors Flitwick, McGonagall and Hermione check the theory behind it. I’m pretty sure its correct, but it wouldn’t hurt to check.”

Dumbledore nodded in agreement, but before he could speak, Professor Flitwick broke in excitedly.

“Harry, have you read Dorvis Masterson’s work on crystal structures? It’s considered the definitive guide in the field.”

Harry nodded. “Yes sir, I have read that volume. The problem was he didn’t take his ideas to the next step. He lacked the means to get beyond a single stage crystal. For example, the crystal we used the other night was a blending of Moonstone and blue Tourmaline. Masterson examined and

defined the properties of individual gemstones. I found that, in order to get the precise level of control required, one needed to combine two or more stones.”

McGonagall sat back in her chair with a broad smile on her face. This was a student from *her* house, after all. Meanwhile, Flitwick looked totally gob smacked.

Harry went on to explain what they had accomplished the other night, while Severus passed around the stone Harry had used. Harry offered to rerun the demonstration, but Dumbledore asked if there were any other modes of the bind that could be demonstrated without causing undue stress on either Severus or himself.

Harry thought for a moment, and then suggested that the awareness transfer might be suitable. It required a more complex crystal matrix, but it would allow Professor Snape to see through the eyes of anyone with the mark. Its range was limited, probably a kilometer or less. The crystal construct was more complex, because it would require three crystals. Harry pointed out that even if he made the matrix he needed, if there were no Dark Marks within a kilometer, nothing would happen.

Finally, he turned to Professor Snape and said, “Professor, this should be your decision. I don’t think this will cause you any pain, but you’re the one that will be doing the looking.”

Severus looked over at his wife. Harry’s ideas had worked so far. A second test would make the theory that much more sound in his mind. It was also one step closer to the removal of his accursed mark. As he caught Serena’s eye, she smiled encouragingly.

Harry chuckled at his look and said, “Believe me Professor, I’m not trying to make you strip before all these people.”

As the people around the table grinned, Severus turned to Dumbledore.

“Headmaster, I’d like to try this. If it works, it would be a second successful test of Harry’s theories.”

Dumbledore nodded in acceptance of Severus’s remark. “Then by all means, let us try this. It will give everyone here first hand knowledge of Harry’s abilities as well.” Turning to Harry, he asked, “Do you need anything special to do this?”

“No sir, just a moment or two to prepare. It’s a little tiring to make a three crystal structure.”

Harry closed his eyes and placed his hands palm up on the table. He took a few cleansing breaths and started to focus. He needed a sunstone as a core, a fluorite and a green sapphire. Within moments, he was repeating the same process he’d used the other night.

Almost everyone at the table gasped. Both Severus and Serena, who’d watched the process once before, motioned them to be silent.

Harry had successfully fused the sunstone and fluorite together. With a flick of a finger, the stone moved out of the way. Concentrating, he created the sapphire and joined it to the stone as well.

When it was complete, the glow from Harry's hands cut off and, opening his eyes, he caught the fused stone in his right hand.

He looked up as the table broke out in a confusing babble of voices, as everyone tried to speak to him at once. Harry looked around, feeling like the questions being hurled his way were physically hitting him. Finally, Dumbledore got everyone's attention.

"Harry, I must say that was most impressive. Judging from Professors Snape and their reaction, you did that in front of them the other day as well?"

"Yes Sir. Last time was easier however. The crystal needed was a simpler matrix."

McGonagall cut in. "Mr. Potter, I am surprised you have kept this hidden from us so long. I don't know whether to be pleased or disappointed with you..." seeing Harry flinch at that she softened her tone "Would you care to explain why you've been deliberately misleading everyone?"

"Professor, one of the best parts of last summer for me was when I worked for a new neighbor. He's an American, and used to be in the American muggle military. Part of one of their elite units, I guess. As it turned out, he's a squib. His father is a wizard, his mother a muggle. Anyway, over the summer and I had a chance to become close friends with him. He taught me many things about how muggles fight wars. One of the most important is something the muggles called 'operational security'. What that really means is, you hide your abilities from your enemies and your friends. If your enemy doesn't know what you can do, then you can surprise him. If your friends don't know what you can do, then they can't let your secrets slip out. I'm sorry if you don't like what I've been hiding from you Professor, but as my friend Jack says, if you want to win at war, you do whatever you have to do. Even if it means trusting very few people."

Professor McGonagall leaned back to considered that. "Very well, Mr. Potter. It's apparent you have your reasons and I can't find fault with your argument."

Professor Flitwick then piped up. "Harry, were you really conjuring those stones. It didn't look like it to me."

Harry always liked the little Charms Professor. Flitwick was one of the nicest teachers and he got along well with him. He leaned forward and turned to the diminutive Professor.

"Sir, I suppose the answer to that would be yes and no. I've found that I can't really conjured gems in sufficient size for what we need to do. So instead, I conjure small tiny fragments of the stones. You could say that, instead of conjuring them, I grow them. I know what I need and just keep conjuring the pieces and fusing them together until it's the right size."

Flitwick raised his eyebrows at Harry. "Indeed... hmmm"

Dumbledore rapped on the table. "Are we ready to proceed Harry? Severus?"

Severus stood and unbuttoned his shirt. Harry nudged Hermione, pointed at the bare-chested Professor and murmured, "Bet you never thought you would have seen that 'Mione,"

Severus sat back down in his chair and nodded to Harry. Serena touched Harry on his arm and gave him an encouraging look. Harry smiled, then turned and levitated the stone, rotating it until the sapphire pointed at Severus. Harry held out one hand. A bright beam of white light flashed out from his hand striking the stone. The stone started to pulsate as it continued to suck up energy. Finally, when the stone had all it could absorb, a pale yellow beam shot out from the stone striking Severus in the chest.

As the light struck him, Severus stiffened and his eyes closed. Harry continued to feed energy into the stone, his brow now beaded with sweat. The room was silent as the minutes passed. When the beam was cut off, Harry slumped in his chair and would have fallen had Serena not caught him. Severus relaxed, his eyes opened slowly.

“Merlin that was... unlike anything... It was like legilimency, yet different. I could see through the eyes of people... I was that person!”

Then it dawned on him what he was talking about. He breathed in sharply and looked at Dumbledore.

“Headmaster, we have three students with the Dark Mark here in the school!”

Everyone except Harry, Hermione and Serena sat up sharply at that moment. Serena and Hermione were helping Harry over to a couch where he could rest.

“Are you sure, Severus?”

“Yes Headmaster. I flashed through three people and was able to identify them.”

“Who did you see, Severus?”

“Pansy Parkinson, Michael Corner and Marietta Edgecombe.”

Dumbledore sat back thoughtfully for a long moment before speaking again.

“Professors, I suggest that we do nothing to alert these students for the moment. We will watch them carefully, but do nothing else until we’ve had time to evaluate the situation.”

Hermione and Serena returned to the table.

“Ah Serena, how is Harry?”

“I think he’ll be fine Headmaster. He overextended himself and is very tired, but I don’t think he’s going to suffer any ill effects. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if he were sleeping right now.”

“Very well. Let’s keep our voices down so as to not disturb him. This is the second successful test of his theory. Professors? Comments?”

Minerva McGonagall started. “Albus, he... that was the most incredible display of wandless magic I have ever seen. Merlin, the energy he expended! As to his research, I agree with Harry’s

idea. Filius, Hermione and myself are probably the best suited to examine the theory behind it. Unfortunately, I don't believe we have the ability to test any part of it."

Albus and Flitwick nodded in agreement

Folding his hands on the tabletop, Dumbledore said, "I quite agree with you Minerva. Harry and Severus are best suited on the practical side, with Serena and myself observing. We'll follow Harry's suggestion. As to how we approach this?

Severus, I know that you would dearly love to be rid of that mark however, I'm afraid I must ask you to be patient. We will remove that it, but right now you're the only willing participant we have that carries it.

Serena? One suggestion, if I may. Go over the details with Miss Granger and prepare everything in advance, should it become necessary to remove Severus's mark in an emergency."

Serena nodded in agreement.

It was decided that Severus and Harry would meet at least once a week to discuss the more practical side of this. Since Harry was already meeting with him to help him learn to control his power levels, Severus decided they could do both at those meetings. He chose not to mention the problem of Harry's power levels to the Headmaster, however.

The meeting broke up shortly afterwards. Professor McGonagall conjured a stretcher and levitated the sleeping Harry onto it. Then, with Hermione in tow, they left the apartment and headed for the Gryffindor tower.

Ginny was shocked when Professor McGonagall entered the common room with Harry on a stretcher, but Hermione explained the situation to her. Once Harry was in his bed, Ginny sat beside him and smoothed his hair while he slept. She stayed there until chased from the dorm by Ron.

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### **Passing time...**

As November slowly passed into December, Harry continued to work with Professors Snape, and occasionally Dumbledore, on advancing the more practical aspects of Harry's work. They had successfully manufactured all of the crystal structures they would need for the known functions, including the Dark Mark removal crystal. This was something Professor Snape now carried with him at all times.

Harry continued to work on controlling his power with Severus. It was slow going, as Harry still had to think about how much power to place behind each spell cast. Until Harry could feel, instinctually, how much power to use each time, Severus would not allow him to return to dueling in his Defense Against the Dark Arts class.

Harry's relationship with Dumbledore mellowed over time. While Harry was more willing to work with Dumbledore, he wasn't ready to trust him fully yet. The Headmaster had kept this

word so far however, and treated Harry as an equal when it came to his research. The working relationship they had forged helped to ease the strain between them.

Harry continued to make his late night forays into the Room of Requirement to train at his own level. His evenings were spent with Ginny at the DA, or meeting Snape. The amount of time Harry had to be alone with Ginny was limited, and it was beginning to bother him. Sure, she was in her OWL year and swamped with work as well, but they needed some time alone.

One night near the end of November, he planned a little timeout for the both of them. Informing the DA that tomorrow would be a day off for all of them, he set his plan in motion. The DA was really shaping up and was working very well. Ron had worked wonders with them.

After Harry finished his late night training session, he transformed into Wings and flame traveled to the top of the girl's stairway. Stealthily, he crept into Ginny's dorm and left a letter floating above her head.

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### **Ginny...**

Ginny woke up slowly and groaned. She hated getting up this early. But today she was going to run with Harry. Sitting up, she hit something floating just over her head. Next to her pillow was a white lily. She snatched the letter out of the air and read.

*Miss Ginevra Molly Weasley,*

*Mr. Harry James Potter begs the honor of serving you a quiet dinner this evening in the Room of Requirement. He pledges his undying love to you and hopes you will join him for an evening of fine dining.*

*HP*

*PS. If you accept this offer, please wear the white lily when you come to breakfast.*

When she went down to breakfast that morning, she entered the Great Hall smiling and wearing the white lily tucked behind her ear.

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### **Harry and Ginny...**

Harry was very nervous. He wanted everything to be just right. He had talked to Dobby earlier in the day and made special arrangements. Now, he found himself pacing back and forth in the transformed Room of Requirement.

He had set the room with a huge window overlooking an ocean somewhere. The room was intimately lit with a table in one corner. There was a couch in front of a fireplace, and a group of enchanted instruments in another corner.

There was a knock on the door and Harry jumped nervously to answer it. Ginny stepped in and her eyes widened as she noticed he was wearing the black and silver trimmed robes he had purchased in Gladrags at the last Hogsmeade visit. The robe had an identical cut to the one he'd worn at the Halloween Ball.

“Harry if I knew you were going to get dressed up...”

He placed a finger over her lips, saying, “Its not important Ginny. I wore this for you. Now, may I escort you to your table Miss Weasley?”

As she linked her arm through his, Harry cast a locking spell on the door, and then led her to a chair. Once she was seated, he sat down across from her, picked up a small bell from the table and rang it. With a pop, Dobby appeared.

“Harry Potter and his Miz Weezy! Dobby is glad to be seeing you again!” With that, Dobby snapped his fingers and the enchanted instruments began to play. He then handed them each a menu and waited while they made their selections. After a short wait, their meal was delivered and they spent a pleasant time enjoying each other’s company.

They talked of silly stuff, school, gossip, what Ron had done lately, even planned their next prank. Finally full, they moved over to the couch and continued their conversation and let dinner settle.

After a short while, Harry stood up and gently grabbed her hand, and pulled her toward him. They moved behind the couch where there was more room and began to dance to the music.

Ginny looked up at Harry, her heart in her eyes. “Thank you, Harry.”

Harry leaned down and kissed her gently on the lips before murmuring, “Anything for you, Gin.”

Tired of dancing, they moved back to the couch and Harry talked openly for the first time about what he wanted after Hogwarts. Ginny learned that Harry wanted to teach at Hogwarts and that he hoped to have at least a couple children. He made it very plain that his plans were incredibly simple, reaching for all the things he was denied as he grew up. Finally, he looked at her shyly and told her that all of this was in her hands.

The look he gave her sent shivers down her spine. She leaned in to him and gently removed his glasses, putting them on an end table. Then she kissed him. As their passion deepened, she felt he was reaching the point where he was going to pull away.

Whispering in his ear she said, “Love, there are still things we can do without doing *that*.”

He looked at her, puzzled. Gently, she guided his hands, letting him explore her. She showed him where to touch and how.

Harry’s senses reeled; this was a totally new experience for him. Never had he experienced such exquisite sensations. Ginny writhed against him as he continued to explore her. When she went rigid, shuddered violently and cried out passionately, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight.

Spent, she collapsed against him for a moment, breathing heavily while he continued to hold her. Eventually, Ginny reconnected to the here and now. Then she started to explore him in return. She started by opening his robe and softly kissing every newly exposed part. Once his robe was open, her hands drifted to his waist. Harry froze as her hand slide between clothing and skin and...he was lost, floating on a sea of sensation that ended with his own cries of passion.



Afterwards they lay entwined in each other's arms, some clothing on the floor, some still on their bodies. Ginny smiled inwardly. She knew that tonight had been a milestone in their relationship, one that Harry had resisted for a long while. Of course, it wasn't as far as Ginny wanted to go, but they had definitely crossed a line. She snuggled closer to Harry and he tightened his grip around her, one hand lazily playing with her hair.

Harry seemed to be mumbling something. That was what roused her from her comfortable state. She looked at him.

"Harry, what are you thinking about?"

Harry's face grew red and he said, "I'm sort of wondering if your parents would allow you to get married while you're still in school. Oh not this year, but maybe the end of the next one when I graduate."

Her eyes widened and she looked at him carefully to see if he was kidding. "Was that your idea of a proposal Mr. Potter?"

He grinned impishly at her and said, "Nope, I'm going to do this right. First I'll ask your parents for their blessing, then I'll ask you..." he suddenly turned all shy again "... that is, if that's what you'd like."

"Are you serious?"

"Very, Miss Weasley. Especially when it comes to you."

She tightened her grip on him and started to cry. Harry got concerned. "Ginny? I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make you cry. If that isn't what you want I..."

His words were cut off suddenly as Ginny kissed him fiercely. When she broke the kiss, she smiled at him. "I was crying because I was happy, silly. I've waited a long time for you, Mr. Potter. There's no way I'm letting you get away from me now."

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### **A few days later, Azkaban Prison...**

There were no walls at the wizard prison of Azkaban. The prison was on an island, unplottable, hidden from the muggle world. In days past the island prison had been guarded by Dementors. But with the rise of Voldemort, they had once again returned to his service. Now wizards guarded it; ten Aurors and over thirty civilian guards patrolled the facility. The only way to and from the island was by enchanted boat. Anti-Apparation wards covered the island and the surrounding sea for more than a mile beyond its shores. It was one of the bleakest, most uninhabitable places on earth. There was a small cluster of cellblocks, quarters for the human staff, a small cemetery and nothing more.

Auror Michael Wood was assigned to guard duty. It was boring work. The prison wasn't filled to capacity, but it had more than its fair share of unsavory types, including eleven recently captured death eaters and all those still remaining from the last batch caught years ago. There were even a few muggles here.

Wood made his rounds routinely. This was boring duty that dulled the mind. He checked each cell, taking a head count. The non-Auror guards rarely ventured into the cellblock area. Prisoners were delivered their meals by house elves who were normally housed underground.

Checking the last cell, Auror Wood never even noticed the chill that crept into the air around him. An alarm sounded somewhere in the distance. He tried to run, but the corridor in front of him was full of Dementors, the corridor behind a dead end. With a soul-tearing scream he crumpled under the assault of multiple Dementors.

The long expected breakout of Azkaban had begun.

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### **Lunch Time, Hogwarts...**

Harry sat at the table with his friends; Ginny smiled mysteriously and kept one hand under the table, resting on his knee. Hermione suspected that something had changed between the two of them, but hadn't managed to pin Ginny down on it yet. She had every intention of getting the girl to talk tonight.

Harry suddenly stood up. His body trembling, the blood drained from his face. Serena looked up from the staff table and saw him.

*Something's wrong. Something's happened,* she thought.

Harry took a lurching step away from the table, stumbled and righted himself. Ginny, Ron and Hermione got up to follow him, looking worried.

"Harry?" Ginny asked.

Serena got up and darted over to Harry. Her departure alerted the rest of the teachers. Dumbledore looked over at Harry, stood up and moved towards him.

Harry took a few steps, his movements more sporadic. His hands whipped to his forehead, his back arched perilously and he pitched backwards with a scream. Blood spurted from between his fingers as he pressed them against his scar. Ron grabbed him, trying to keep him from banging into the table as he writhed in agony.

Serena dropped to her knees beside the boy. Noting the blood, she pulled his hand away from his forehead. His scar, pulsing a malevolent red, bled freely. As Ron continued to restrain him, she looked up at the Headmaster in anguish.

Hermione held a weeping Ginny, ignoring her own tears. Watching her friend suffering, holding the tormented girl close, she screamed, "Can't someone do something? He's in so much pain!"

As they looked helplessly at each other, Harry's body went limp. His face was ashen and his chest barely moved. Serena grabbed his wrist, checking for a pulse.

“Headmaster, we need to get him to the infirmary right away. And we need Severus there as well. He’s pulse is very weak. We’ll need some special potions made.”

Dumbledore conjured a stretcher and levitated Harry onto it. Serena sent Ron to find Professor Snape while the rest of them escorted Harry to the infirmary.

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### **Hogwarts Infirmary...**

Harry shifted in bed, opened his eyes and blinked at his surroundings. Then he sighed loudly. This was becoming a most annoying habit! He fumbled for his glasses. Someone moved them into his hand and he put them on.

Ginny was sitting next to his bed. Professors Snape were standing behind her. Dumbledore stood at the foot of the bed, eyeing him with concern.

Harry grimaced and murmured, “I’m getting tired of waking up in the infirmary.”

Professor Dumbledore spoke up. “You only have to stay one night, Harry. Madam Pomfrey wants to observe you tonight, to make sure the potions you’ve been giving are working properly. Now tell me. What did you see?”

Harry’s temper flared. *No ‘How are you feeling Harry?’ or ‘I hope your feeling better Harry’. My entrails could come spilling out of my stomach and he wouldn’t give a shit, so long as I told him what I saw before I died.*

Ginny reached out to touch him. He leaned into her hand for a moment, drawing comfort from it and calming himself.

“I’m sorry Professor, but you’re doing it again. You didn’t even ask how I was feeling. You just wanted to know what your useful little tool saw.”

Harry rolled on his side closed his eyes for a long time before he spoke again.

“Professor I saw nothing. I’ve been blocking his visions and attempted intrusions for months now. The only thing he’s able to do is inflict pain. He does that when he’s happy, or when he’s killing someone. The pain is what started me down the path to the Protean. No one, other than my friends, seemed to be the slightest bit interested in the pain he causes me. So I started researching magic bonds, hoping to find a way of making the pain stop.

I’m sorry Professor. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. But I’m just so very tired. I want to enjoy whatever time I have left to my life, Sir. Everything seems so out of control to me. My future is tied to a monster. My meeting with him is foretold and looms ahead closer than anyone realizes. I can’t see what lies beyond that. I live today with a dream and I’m not sure if I’m even allowed that. As you pointed out to me once, ‘it does not do to dwell on dreams...’”

Ginny moved to his bed and swept him into her arms, shooting Dumbledore a vicious look. As Harry drifted off to sleep, he mumbled, “Ginny is hope sir, she is my dream... for me”

Dumbledore sighed. "I'm sorry Miss Weasley. In my attempt to find out what had happened, I victimized him again. And I wronged you as well, Miss Weasley. He needs what you represent to him. When he reawakens, tell him I hope he is feeling better. Also please tell him that if I didn't think he had a chance, I myself would have taken him and gone to a place where Voldemort would not have been able to find him."

Ginny eyed him distrustfully, but nodded. At her nod, Dumbledore turned and walked away.

Serena sat down on the edge of the bed and watched the couple closely. Running a weary hand over her face, she sighed.

"I envy you Ginevra. He touches so many with his heart, and we are all better because of it. But I suspect this one will give his heart only once in his life and he has given it to you. He will sleep for a while more. When he awakes, make sure he eats something. He should be fine by morning."

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### **Hermione, Harry, and Ginny...**

Harry, Ginny and Ron sat at lunch the following day, pouring over a copy of the Daily Prophet.

*Escape from Azkaban!*  
*By Rita Skeeter*

*In a bold daytime attack, an estimated 200 Dementors and Death Eaters assaulted the island prison of Azkaban yesterday morning. More than forty guards were killed in the attack. And at least twenty imprisoned Death Eaters were set free along with other prisoners.*

*The Daily Prophet considers this the final straw of an ineffectual administration and calls for a vote of no confidence against Minister Fudge and his administration. Percy Weasley, Minister Fudge's executive assistant is quoted as saying, "The Minister cannot be held responsible for the breakout of a few convicts. There are people in charge of security at the prison and he had far more important duties to attend to."*

*The Prophet has learned that there will be a special meeting of the Wizengamot today to consider new proposals presented by Amelia Bones, director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.*

*And what of the Boy-Who-Lived? He saved us once 16 years ago; he sits safely at Hogwarts ignoring the peril of the wizarding world. Shouldn't he help us as he did in the past? Rumor has it he is romantically involved with one Virginia Weasley, the youngest child of a minor ministry official, and too busy to save the lives of our world.*

Harry frowned after reading the article. Blasted paper! It was bad enough seeing his own name in print, but why did they have to drag Ginny in as well?

Harry leaned over and banged his head against the table a few times in frustration.

Neville walked over to Harry and placed a hand on his shoulder. "No worries Harry. I've talked to our housemates. We'll screen your mail for you and get rid of the howlers and jinxed letters."

“Thanks Nev,” Harry replied.

“Do you think Gryffindor would mind doing mine as well, Neville? Blasted paper!” Ginny said as she angrily tossed the Daily Prophet away.

“We’ll take care of it, Ginny. Operation Post Office will be up and running for both of you by the end of the day. I’ll let everyone know,” Neville said, smiling in sympathy. Giving Harry’s shoulder a squeeze, he left to pass the word to the rest of their house.

“I’m sorry about this luv,” Harry said with a grimace. “It’s one of the problems of loving the Bloody-Boy-Who-Lived-But-Can’t-Keep-his-Name-Out-Of-The-Paper!”

Ginny frowned at that, replying dryly, “Ok, I can live with Operation Post Office, but don’t you get in your head that I love the Boy-Who-Lived. If you do, I’ll make you the Boy-Who-Sings-Soprano!”

Harry grinned at her. “Don’t hurt the plumbing luv. I think someday you’re going to want everything in working order.”

Ginny grinned back and murmured, “You bloody better believe it, Mr. Potter.”

Hermione appeared at the door of the Great Hall and she had ‘that look’. She was a witch on a mission. Purposefully, she strode over to Harry and thrust two sheets of parchment under his nose.

“Harry, these two diagrams were also in your notebook. I had the Headmaster go through your book again, looking for anything that looked similar to what you put in your paper. Why didn’t you include these two?”

Harry looked over the two diagrams as Ginny peered over his shoulder. By now, everyone knew that the teachers were working with the information in Harry’s notebook and looking over his research.

Harry laid the two sheets onto the table. “Hermione, the first one is a five gem matrix. To be honest, I’m not sure I can make it. The second one looked interesting, but I couldn’t see the use behind it. Basically, it would absorb the energy but do nothing with it.”

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment, then pointed to the second parchment. “Harry, think carefully. It will absorb the energy right?”

He nodded in agreement.

“Where will the energy go, Harry?”

“No where ‘Mione. It’ll just sit there.”

“Harry! Think muggle for a moment. What does that sound like to you?”

Harry sat back thinking, then his eyes widened. “A battery? But how would we tap into it?”

Hermione looked smug and said primly. “You’re not the only genius in this school Harry. I found a hex we can modify that will drain and channel the magic.”

Harry moaned and said, “Why do I get the feeling you’ve been saving that one to bludgeon me with, ‘Mione?”

Hermione took on an innocent air while Ginny giggled.

She once again drew his attention to the first parchment. “Harry, what was your intent with this?”

“It would have been a detector. Basically, it would have copied an echo of a mark and would have glowed in the presence of a mark. But its too complex ‘Mione. Five stones? I’d collapse before I was done making the thing.”

Hermione waved her hand at him, dismissing the complaint. “Harry you’re thinking size and number of stones, but you’ve been making pretty large stones. What if you make this a lot smaller and use the Engorgio charm on it?”

Harry rocked back like he had been slapped and mumbled something.

Hermione pressed him “Harry? What was that?”

Harry looked sheepish. “I never thought of doing it that way.”

Ginny snickered into her drink. Hermione shook her head and said “Oh Harry! That’s a first year spell, remember?”

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### **The Snape’s private apartment...**

A few days later, Harry met with Professors Snape, the Headmaster, and unsurprisingly this time, Hermione. This would probably be their last meeting until they returned from the Holiday break. They had completed making Hermione’s battery and even a couple of the dark detectors. Those had been a problem. Harry had to make them very small. They were simply too complex to make at anything larger than the size of a pea. Once made however, they’d managed to enlarge them with the Engorgio.

Tonight’s meeting was to review how far they had come and make plans so that should Severus need it, Harry would be able to get to him quickly enough to remove the mark. Harry was feeling a bit off tonight. He was a little pale and relieved that he didn’t have to make any more crystals or charge up any more of Hermione’s batteries. His scar had been burning fitfully all day and it was really wearing him down. Sighing, he turned back to what Hermione was saying.

“... Professor Flitwick and myself have successfully tested the channeling hex on one of the charged crystals Harry made last week. With the help of Professor Snape, we repeated the transference test without a problem. Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick seem to agree that we can get enough magic out of a charged crystal for several uses. They don’t think there would be enough power however, to do something like attack the bond or remove it. I think they’re right. We now have close to fifty of the detector crystals. Harry had been making them

one at a time when I tried Replico on one just on a hunch. Replico greatly sped up the making of them. I'd suggest we get each crystal mounted into a piece of jewelry and distribute it among the Order members. These crystals don't need Harry to power them. They merely pulsate with a soft light in the presence of a Dark Mark...any Dark Mark. We've tested one secretly against two of the students with marks. As you get closer to the mark, the pulsation increases in speed until its nearly continuous..."

Dumbledore raised a hand, stopping Hermione. He looked at Harry with concern.

"Harry, are you all right? You look quite pale."

Harry looked around the table at the concerned eyes facing him.

"I think I'll be fine Sir. It's just my scar burning again. It's not as bad as it was the other week though. I think it's somehow tied into what he's doing. When he personally kills, the pain is unbearable. When he's very pleased with something, the pain is unbearable. When his minions are doing what he wants, it's pretty much like now. Painful but not that bad." He stopped and rubbed his scar. The room was quiet as the people in it looked at the boy helplessly.

Finally, in a small voice that seemed so devoid of hope, he asked, "Sir, do you ever think I'll be able to spend a day with pain?"

Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Harry, I firmly believe there will come a time when you will not only experience many days without pain, but also many other things that have been denied to you for so long. But I think that's enough for us tonight. You obviously need some rest." He paused for a moment, eyes twinkling merrily, and then said, "Miss Granger can escort you back to your common room where, undoubtedly, Miss Weasley will be more than happy to help soothe your pain."

Harry nodded and, with Hermione in tow, they left the apartment after bidding everyone a goodnight.

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### **Elsewhere in England, location unknown...**

Lucius Malfoy stepped into the chamber. Behind him floated a body.

A voice came from the far end of the darkened chamber.

"Lucius... my servant, come forward. I trust you found your stay in Azkaban enjoyable. I am pleased to see you again."

Lucius walked closer. At the precisely correct point he dropped to his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robe.

"Lucius, explain yourself. Why do you bring me this... thing?" Voldemort pointed at the body still floating behind Malfoy.

“My lord, this muggle is insane, but his insanity has a purpose; one that can be used. He lives for one purpose my lord. To kill Harry Potter.”

“POTTER!” spat Voldemort. “Too long has he irritated me from a far. Do you really think this muggle can kill the boy, Lucius?”

“My lord, the muggle was put into Azkaban because he had beaten Potter severely, nearly killing him. I am certain that in the right time and the right place he will kill Potter. It will just be a matter of picking the time and place and getting the muggle there.”

Voldemort laughed. It was an evil sound with no trace of mirth in it.

“Very well. We will try it your way Lucius. For your sake I hope it works. You have not displeased me. Send in Wormtail!”

Peter Pettigrew scurried forward and groveled in front of Voldemort.

“Wormtail, tell me, does Snape still live?”

“Our spies within the school report that Snape still lives my lord. They are unable to get close enough to deal with him. They also report he has taken a wife my Lord, who is the new Potions Mistress, while he teaches defense. Neither of them has left the castle since mid-summer.”

“Your report is not pleasing to me Wormtail, but perhaps I can use some of it. Yes... it might be interesting to allow Mrs. Snape to watch her husband as his mind is driven into madness. I will consider this.”

Pettigrew started to move back to his previous position.

“Oh Wormtail... your reward...Crucio!”

The screaming seemed to go on forever.

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### **Alls fair in love and Prank Wars...**

Remus Lupin was sitting in the living room at Grimmauld Place. Having gone over the daily correspondence for the Order, he now looked over the material that was addressed directly to him. There was more than usual, but that was to be expected. With little more than four days until his wedding to Nymphadora Tonks, there were a lot of details to arrange still.

One item caught his eye. *Hmmm... Addressed to me as portfolio manager for one H. Potter? He thought. A mighty odd way of addressing a letter.*

He opened the letter to find two parchments.

*Mr. Potter,*

*As a result of your foresighted investment in our establishment, we are pleased to enclose a copy*



*of our yearly statement and a listing of funds that have now been deposited to your Gringots account.*

*Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes has turned out to be an outstanding success. We acknowledge that without your most generous support, this would not have been possible. We look forward to a long and profitable relationship, and pray this letter finds you in good health.*

*Fred and George Weasley*

*Owner and Owner of WWWS. Good show on joining the family Harry! And if the rumors are true, you might even make it a more official relationship!*

*Hmmm ok seems fairly standard although a bit dry to be from the twins, considered Remus. Now lets look at how things have done for that investment.*

Remus picked up the second parchment and started to scan it. His eyes widened when he saw Harry had seen a several hundred percent return at this point.

Suddenly, there was a bright flash of light. When his eyes cleared, Remus looked around carefully. Something was dangling and tickling his neck. Standing up, he looked in the mirror over the fireplace and saw that his ears had been transformed. He now wore a perfect set of Basset Hound ears.

Remus started to chuckle. *Those Weasley boys! It should be fun to figure out how they did this.* Shaking his head, he quickly discovered that was a mistake as first his right, then his left ear flopped forward, slapping him in the face.

*Not good. If I can't get rid of these before the wedding... TONKS! Oh Merlin, she's due back soon! What's she going to say when she sees this? She's going to kill me...*

After trying several counter spells, he gave up. Thankfully, the twin's pranks never lasted long. But if the ears weren't gone by his wedding day, he was going to hurt those boys!

Sitting back down, he looked over the letter once again. *Hmmm...this gives me an idea. And it's just what they deserve!*

Grabbing a blank piece of parchment, he started to write...

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### **Hogwarts, breakfast time...**

Harry and his friends were sitting around having breakfast and talking. Harry, Ron and Ginny were a little disappointed that Hermione couldn't spend Christmas at the Burrow with them. But she would see them for Remus's wedding, and they would arrange to meet in Diagon Alley before they had to return to Hogwarts.

As the morning Owls started coming in, Harry looked up in surprise as one of the Order owls dropped off a letter from Remus.

*Wings*

*This is an official Marauder notice. In an unsuspected and dastardly surprise attack, those red headed twins, Carrot Top I and Carrot Top II, subjected Moony to a most unsavory alteration. THIS IS WAR! TOTAL GLOBAL PRANK WAR!*

*I call upon Wings and his two apprentices to aid me in this conflict.*

*Moony*

*PS. Tonks is interested in helping. Should we induct her as well?*

Harry read the note from Remus, then passed it over to Ginny. She took the letter and read it as well. Her eyes took on a predatory gleam. Excusing herself, she sprinted over to the Ravenclaw table where Neville and Luna were sitting. She showed the note to Luna, who read it and turned to look at Harry, giving him an evil grin.

Harry grabbed a piece of parchment and scribbled a reply to Remus.

*Moony my friend,*

*Wings and his apprentices stand firm with the Marauders! We of the New Marauders are ready, willing and able to do our part to prank the enemy into oblivion! Take no prisoners! Keep a firm upper lip!*

*Wings and Company.*

*PS. Tonks needs a name!*

Harry attached the letter to the Order owl and sent it on its way.

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### **Grimmauld Place...**

A very floppy eared Remus sat with a very floppy eared Tonks; waiting for an owl. Tonks felt sorry for Remus and thought she'd cheer him up by transforming her own ears to match his.

When the owl finally arrived, Remus quickly scanned the parchment before passing it to Tonks. While she was reading, he attached another letter to the owl and sent it out again.

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### **Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes, Diagon Alley...**

Fred Weasley was attending to a customer when George yelled at him.

"Oy Fred! We just got a letter from Remus. I wonder what the old fellow has to say that he couldn't floo us about?"

"Well open it George! We're not going to find out without opening it."

George opened the letter and two parchments fell out. Fred picked up the top parchment and, with George reading over his shoulder, scanned the contents.

*Fred & George,*

*As portfolio manager for Harry Potter, I admit to being most surprised and pleased with how*

*well this particular investment has turned out. I can assure you that Mr. Potter is also pleased, and has no intention of terminating the relationship anytime in the foreseeable future.*

*In reply to your yearly statement, Mr. Potter has taken the liberty of hiring an accounting firm to explain it to him. You will find their detailed analysis on the attached parchment.*

*I do so look forward to seeing you both over the holidays.*  
*Remus Lupin.*

George picked up the second parchment. As he read, his face paled. Seeing his brother's ashen appearance, Fred grabbed the edge of the parchment, leaned closer and read:

*Gentlemen!*  
*Our good friend Remus Lupin explained what happened to him upon reading your yearly statement. We find your sneak attack to be admirable, if a bit primitive. Since Remus is a dear friend, family in fact, we have no choice but to consider your attempt at humor as a declaration of Prank War. You will be contacted when we are ready to accept your surrender. In the meantime, we suggest more care be given to whom you unknowingly prank.*

*Messrs Padfoot, Moony and Prongs of the Marauders and the New Marauders.*

Fred and George looked at each other in consternation. Fred tried to drop the letter and couldn't. Neither could George. For a good ten minutes they tugged, tried tearing the letter in half, nothing seemed to work! Finally, Fred got his wand out and attempted to banish the letter. The parchment had other ideas. When the smoke cleared, George was surprised to find his twin covered from head to toe in a suit of armor and unable to move.

George sighed. This would be fun if they knew who to retaliate against.

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### **Elsewhere in England, location unknown, last night before holiday...**

Voldemort sat in his chamber with most of his servants gathered around him. Tonight was a special night. Tonight he would give the Snape's a yuletide gift they would long remember.

Voldemort cackled gleefully and activated his link to Severus' Dark Mark.

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### **Gryffindor Private Apartment...**

It was late, well past midnight when a loud banging woke Minerva McGonagall. Grumbling to herself and thinking it was probably nothing more than another sick first year student, she threw on a robe, hurried over to the door and flung it open.

She was shocked to see Serena standing there. Her normally well-composed features contorted with fear. Serena wrung her hands.

"Serena? What is it? What's wrong?"

“Harry. I need Harry, Minerva! Oh Merlin, please I hope its not too late.”

“You go back down to your apartment Serena, I’ll bring Harry down there...”

“Hurry Minerva, I don’t know how much longer he can last...”

McGonagall nodded and hurried back into her apartment to use her private door to the common room. Hurrying up the stairs into the boy’s dorm, she quickly located the correct room. Finding Harry’s bed, she drew back the curtain. Harry was sleeping fitfully again tonight. What ever was happening, it was bleeding over to Harry through his scar. Before she could rouse him, his eyes snapped open.

“It’s time, isn’t it Professor?”

“Yes Mr. Potter. Professor Snape was here a moment ago; she says her husband is in great trouble. You must hurry.”

Harry climbed out of his bed, pulled on a robe and some slippers, and then led Professor McGonagall from the Gryffindor tower. The pair hurried down to the dungeons where a worried Serena met them at the door and led them into the bedroom.

“I will go get the Headmaster,” Minerva said.

“No need Minerva. I am here,” said Dumbledore, walking into the bedroom.

Harry looked at Professor Snape. He lay on the bed, trembling but stiff as a board. The mark on his arm glowed a spiteful red. His eyes were rolled up in his head, only the whites were showing. His teeth were clenched tight and a trickle of blood flowed from his nose.

Serena pushed the removal crystal into Harry’s arms, a look of desperation in her eyes. “Please Harry...”

Harry glanced at the Headmaster who nodded at him. Harry turned back to Serena. “It will be ok. I promise.”

Harry walked around the bed and placed the crystal on Severus’s chest. Holding both hands out over the crystal he closed his eyes and took a few calming breathes. He concentrated on the crystal, then opened his eyes and began.

Both of Harry’s hands suddenly blazed with a dazzling white energy. The glow continued to increase in intensity as the crystal on Severus’s torso rose up slowly to hover between Harry’s hand Snape’s chest. Once the blended diamond and emerald had reached the midpoint, the light blasted down into the crystal.

Unlike previous uses of the crystals, this time there was no charging period. The energy passed from the emerald facing Harry’s hands to the diamond facing Severus. The beam that hit Severus wasn’t a single color; it was a rainbow of colors. Harry gritted his teeth and increased the power flow to the crystal.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light traveling back up the crystal to Harry. In a second's time, Harry was covered in a blazing nimbus of white light. A similar flash traveled down to envelope Severus, only his color was that of an ever-changing rainbow.

Severus was suddenly released from his paralysis, his back arched and both he and Harry began to scream at the same time. The sound was awesome and yet it wasn't complete. As Harry continued to pour energy through the connection, another voice joined their chorus...

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### **Elsewhere in England, location unknown...**

Voldemort was enjoying himself. He was pouring power into his connection to Snape. Through it, he could feel an echo of the pain Severus was feeling.

His servants laughed as they watched their master torture and torment the spy.

Voldemort was concentrating on the connection, intent on making Snape suffer as much as possible, when a surge of coruscating power flooded up the link in his direction. He staggered to his feet screaming, his mind pounding within his head, and an intense burning on his arm.

Voldemort fought for control of the connection, but the power coming through was too great. Frantically, he tried breaking the link. He tried slamming his mental shield down tight, but they promptly collapsed under the onslaught.

His servants were of no help! They rushed forward, but were afraid to touch him. A few, a foolish few, fled the room. Most were simply frozen in shock.

He stood there wracked with pain, screaming. And he didn't scream alone. For two other voices were screaming with him. The more he tried to control the link; the more his arm burned; it was already smoking.

The sleeve of his robe burst into flame; he staggered a few steps under the pounding assault, and then the link collapsed, gone entirely. His eyes rolled up in his head and he pitched face down onto the hard stone floor. The chamber was finally silent again, except for the shuffling of feet from the uncertain Death Eaters.

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### **Snape's Quarters...**

Harry and Severus continued to scream as the power poured through the link. The crystal was spinning wildly now, faster and faster, throwing a rainbow of light about the room. The strange third voice vanished from the chorus of screams, the light surrounding Harry and Severus flared once more blinding the stunned onlookers. When their eyes adjusted again, Severus was silent on the bed with Harry lying over his legs, face down.

McGonagall leapt to help Harry while Serena went to check on Severus. Dumbledore helped McGonagall get Harry into a chair.

Serena looked up in surprise. "Headmaster, the mark is gone!"

Harry roused himself to mumble, “I hope so. I don’t think I want to do that again.”

As Severus started to come around, those in the room heard him murmur, “Did anyone get the number of the Hungarian Horntail that hit me?”

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## **Chapter 8    Happy Holidays.**

### **Hogwarts, Start of the Holiday Break...**

Harry Potter waited impatiently in the Gryffindor common room for the others to show up. The house elves had already come by to pick up the trunks of those students going home for the holiday.

Home. That word was about to take on a new meaning for him today. It had taken him sixteen years, but he was finally going to a place where there was a family that loved him and wanted him. He smiled weakly at that idea; it was still so new to him.

To say Harry was tired was an understatement. Last night he had performed a feat of magic that few could rival. He was exhausted from the effort. He heard a sound; the door to the common room was opening as Ron and the girls came down the stairs from their dorm rooms.

Professor Serena Snape and Professor McGonagall walked into the common room. Serena looked like she had spent most of her night crying. She looked like Harry felt, but then he was sure he didn’t look much better either.

Serena embraced Harry, whispering a fierce, “Thank you” in his ear. Harry blushed at that. His friends watched silently. He had explained what happened earlier at breakfast.

Professor McGonagall spoke. “Mr. Potter, I have spoken to the Headmaster about what occurred and he’s going to recommend to the Board of Governors that a special reward be issued for service to Hogwarts. I agree with him. What you did last night is worthy of a true Gryffindor and no mere house points are sufficient...”

He flinched slightly at that. Tom Riddle had once received a similar award. The parallels between Tom Riddle and himself were more than a little unnerving.

“I hope you find time to rest during this Holiday, Mr. Potter. You need it. The carriages to the train station will be here shortly. I suggest you and your friends make their way down to the Entrance Hall.”

“Thank you Professors. And may you both enjoy the holiday,” he said.

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### **Hogwarts Headmaster's Office...**

Albus Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and considered the events of the night before. It had gone almost entirely as Harry had predicted with one exception, the inclusion of that third voice. Albus considered the possibilities and was left with only one logical conclusion. That third voice was Voldemort. And if that were true, it just might be possible that Harry struck a heavy blow against the enemy last night.

Albus chuckled at the memory. To be sure, it had been painful and horrific for everyone involved. But, he was forced to admit; it would not have been possible at all had it not been for the fact that Harry had, in his own fashion, come to love his dreaded professor and his wife. He smiled broadly in anticipation of dropping that little bombshell on the perpetually sneering Professor. Severus was, at times, so much fun to play with!

Fawkes sat on his perch behind Dumbledore, sampling his friend's thoughts. From what he could gather from Albus, the fledgling had struck a blow against the dark last night. He settled his feathers smugly and thought *I always knew he would do well.*

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### **Hogwarts Express, later that day...**

Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna shared a compartment on the train back to King's Cross. Ginny had her arm around Harry and he leaned into her dozing peacefully. This was a far cry from the last time he was on this train.

An hour later, Harry had woken from his nap and was busy talking to the others and holding his Ginny when they had the expected visitor.

"So Potty, are you awake enough to fight your own fights this time instead of letting a bunch of weasels and mudbloods fight for you?" Malfoy said with a sneer as Crabbe and Goyle snickered behind him.

Ron started to rise when Harry stopped him by speaking.

"Malfoy, for five years now you've come here on every train trip, and for five years you've been scared away, cursed six ways from Sunday and sent stumbling off. What I'd like to know is; are you truly that stupid and incapable of learning? Are you so impaired that you've been unable to learn from the last five years of train trips? If so, how can you possibly expect your Dark Lord to accept you as a follower? Your damaged goods Malfoy, and even Voldemort doesn't want you."

Malfoy turned livid and started sputtering "When my father..."

Harry reared up out of his seat and cut him off. "Your father is an escaped convict Malfoy. When he's captured, he'll be sent through the veil, not sent back to Azkaban. All of the Death Eaters are to be sent through the veil. Are you really sure you want to be one of them?"

"You can't talk about my father like that!" Malfoy fumbled in his robe for his wand.

Harry's hands blurred and his wand whipped out. In a motion nearly too fast to be seen; Malfoy found himself silenced, his head sprouting a forest of mushrooms and shoved from the compartment so hard, he bounced off the opposite wall. Unfortunately, when he rebounded, it was to slam against the door, which had been shut and locked after his rather rushed exit.

Harry's wand vanished as he sat back down, ignoring the banging on the glass. Crabbe and Goyle were yelling something. Malfoy was trying, but couldn't be heard. With a smirk, Ginny pulled the drapes, cutting off the sight.

Hermione turned to Harry, a quizzical look on her face. "Mushrooms Harry?"

"Yeah. Stupid git is prime fertilizer for them wouldn't you say?" He asked with a grin.

After a few minutes Harry unlocked and reopened the door, then said in a loud voice, "It's ok, Auntie Tonks. You can come in now!"

The others looked at Harry like he had driven off the deep end, when a disembodied voice hissed. "Damnit Harry, stop doing that! And don't call me AUNTIE!"

"Oh and Hermione, don't forget to bring your parents to the celebration on Monday. Please? Neville? Luna? Same goes for you."

The group nodded, not quite sure where Tonks was.

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### **Kings Cross Station...**

The train was about to arrive at the station when suddenly an idea crossed Harry's mind. He leaned forward and tapped Ron on the knee. Ron leaned forward and Harry whispered something in Ron's ear that caused his eyes to widen. Then Harry repeated the same process with Neville. Neville gulped nervously and nodded.

The group of friend piled off the train and collected their luggage, placing trunks onto trolleys. Harry wandlessly shrunk Ginny and Ron's trunks before doing the same to his own. Leading the group to the waiting cluster of parents, Harry looked sternly at Ron and Neville. Both looked nervous but determined.

Arthur and Molly Weasley waited with Hermione's parents, Neville's Grandmother and Luna's father. Hermione's parents, being muggles, always enjoyed these brief forays into the Wizarding world. Everyone stood around talking for a bit. Just after the group finished wishing good holidays to each other, but before they could go their separate ways, it happened.

Ron grabbed Hermione and kissed her passionately. Her parents, Emma and Dan watched with shock. Neville did the same thing to Luna, which caused her father to break out into a broad grin. Harry grabbed Ginny and was kissing her as well.

Molly and Arthur were torn. Arthur kept looking back and forth between Ron and Harry, not quite sure what to say or do. Molly had a broad smile on her face and in her mind she had visions



of both bushy headed freckled faced and red headed green-eyed grandchildren. Her eyes filled with tears.

Ron broke from the kiss first, leaving Hermione swaying slightly, her eyes still closed and a dreamy expression on her face.

Neville followed a moment later. Luna had a very pleased look and Neville looked like he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. His Grandmother looked on sternly for a moment longer before her look softened and she snorted in amusement.

Ron looked over at Harry. HE WAS STILL KISSING HIS LITTLE SISTER!

“Oy Potter, knock it off yer git! I can see why you made me and Neville do that, but you’re going home with her for Merlin’s sake!”

Harry broke from his kiss with Ginny, but kept one arm around her. Her eyes had a glassy look to them.

“Ron, I love you like a brother and think you’re my best mate, but one of these days you are going to have to learn that there’s more important things in life than Quidditch. Rule number one Ron; never pass up the opportunity to kiss the most beautiful witch in the world.”

Dan Granger coughed and looked at Hermione. She blushed and murmured, “Ummm... I’ll tell you all about it later. Or maybe I’ll tell mum and she can tell you.”

Harry snickered. “Chicken.”

Harry gave Hermione a brief hug in farewell; Ginny joined them. The groups parted, each to go their own way.

Harry, Ginny and Ron walked over to Molly and Arthur. Arthur brightly announced their travel plans to get to the Burrow.

“We’ll take some muggle taxis to the Leaky Cauldron and use the public floo from there to get home! This should be fun! Muggle Taxis, we might even be lucky enough to be inside one when it hits something!”

The trip from Kings Cross to the Leaky Cauldron would have been uneventful, but Arthur kept shoving his arm in the driver’s face and pointing at the dashboard asking questions. Arthur nearly got his wish several times before arriving, and the cab driver probably retired after that trip.

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### **Welcome Home Harry...**

Harry stepped through the floo and looked around uncertainly. He had been to the Burrow before and knew his way around, but this time was different. Now he was home and he was really very nervous. He wasn’t sure what to do and seeing both Ron and Ginny head up to their rooms left him feeling just a little lost. Arthur muttered something about checking for the daily owl delivery. Molly nodded at him, and then turned to Harry with a big smile.

“Harry dear, let me show you to your room.”

He followed Molly as she led him up to the twins’ old room. Seeing his expression, she smiled and told him that she and Arthur had checked the room most carefully for traps, charms and hexes.

She enlarged his trunk while he wandered around looking at the room. It was simple, it wasn’t all that great, and the furniture looked old and had quite a few burn marks on it. But it was all his and it was the best room in the whole world! He had a table where he could work. Where the other bed had been, there was a bookshelf that he could put his books in.

“Harry, I’m going to be doing a laundry later. Let me just get out your dirty clothes for the wash.”

Harry was too preoccupied surveying his new space to do more than nod at her.

Molly started rooting through his trunk. She found several photos of him and Ron, a photo of him and Ginny kissing at the dance. *They looked so wonderful together*, she thought. There was a photo of what had to be his parents and a young Sirius Black. She smiled and compared Harry to his father. His father really was quite handsome, but Harry had inherited his mother’s striking green eyes. The three people looked so happy in the photo. There was a small photo album with a young Lily Potter holding Harry. She sighed for a moment, thinking *he has so few things from them*.

Rooting around deeper in his trunk, she pulled out school robes and some very fancy dress robes. Next came a couple of packages that were probably holiday presents. Finally she started finding some clothes. *What’s this?* She thought. She pulled out a single pair of large pants ripped, torn, and stained ominously, a torn sweatshirt and some underwear. Several of the t-shirts were stained with blood. Her expression darkened. *Damn those muggles to treat a child this way!*

Hearing a noise behind her, she whirled around. Harry was staring at the blood stained shirt in her hand, looking to be on the verge of tears. She dropped the shirt and swept him into her arms holding him tight. Harry sobbed softly into her shoulder while she held him. Ginny bounced into the room, spotted the shirt on the floor and her mother. Ginny’s expression matched her mother’s. Molly shook her head slightly and Ginny grimaced back before leaving the room. Ginny understood.

Molly led Harry to the bed, sat him down, and then took a seat next to him. She waited for him to settle down before saying anything.

“Harry, do you have any other clothes?”

“No... No one ever took me shopping. Whenever my aunt and uncle went shopping, they’d lock me in the cupboard, or in my room. I’ve bought a few things when Hagrid first took me to Diagon Alley, and a few things at Gladrags in Hogsmeade, but that’s about it. I have the money to buy clothes, but never got the chance. It’s probably a good thing that my Uncle didn’t know about my Gringots accounts. He would have taken that money just like he took my money from work this past summer.”

Molly was furious, but did her best to hide that fact. *He’s taken far more than that from you Harry. How you managed to survive those people and remain a child of the light is nothing short of a miracle. Merlin himself must be watching over you!*

“Harry, I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. How about tomorrow we go let you get some of that money and help you go shopping for clothes. Then when we get back, we’ll have a little ceremony and burn these things?”

Harry took on a wistful look, and then asked Molly if it would be ok if he allowed Ron and Ginny to buy some things also? *I’ll have a talk with Ron about that she thought, he’ll understand.*

“Ok Harry, but nothing too expensive. I’ll talk to them both in a bit about it. Now dear, you look so tired still. Professor Dumbledore floo’d us this morning explaining briefly what you did last night for Professor Snape. He suggested you should be allowed to rest as much as possible today. Why don’t you lay down and I’ll have someone wake you in a few hours.”

Harry nodded and placed his glasses down on the night table. Molly hugged him again and whispered in his ear, “Welcome home Harry. Your family has missed you for so very long and we’re glad you’re back where you belong.” Harry hugged her fiercely, as if he was trying to get sixteen years of motherly love in a single hug, before lying down. Molly smoothed his unruly locks for a bit as his breathing deepened.

Harry Potter was home at last.

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### **Weasley Family Conference...**

Molly gathered up Harry’s clothing and closed the door before walking to Ginny’s room.

“Ginny, be a dear and get your brother. I’d like to speak to both of you down in the kitchen with your father please.”

Molly was descending the stairs when the floo erupted and Fred and George stepped out.

“We figured...”

“...we’d come welcome...”

“...our new brother to his...”

“...new home!”

Molly gave them one of those patented stares and motioned for them to join her in the kitchen. She entered the kitchen and placed Harry’s old clothes in a bag. They would be dealt with later. She pointed at George and told him to go get his father from the shed and bring him back. Fred she told to sit down and behave himself, receiving an innocent look in return.

Ron and Ginny entered a moment later, looking at Molly curiously. Arthur and George came in shortly after that.

Molly turned to survey her family. They all wore a cautious look. They had each experienced Molly when she wore that “look” and they wondered who had done what and to whom.

“I just finished helping Harry unpack, thinking I’d grab his clothes for the wash. Other than what he had purchased for himself at Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, most of what he owned was little better than this...”

She pulled a bloodstained shirt out from the bag, showed it to them, and then slammed the shirt back into the bag. Ginny’s eyed brimmed with tears, while Molly continued in a softer tone.

“Harry may be one of the wealthiest wizards in the country, but he’s never really had the opportunity to spend any of that money on himself, except for a few rare occasions. Tomorrow, we are all going out, as a family, to help him get some new clothes for himself. He’s asked if it would be ok if he could let Ron and Ginny buy some things as well. I’ve told him that would be alright as long as he didn’t spend too much...”

She stabbed a finger out at Ron.

“Ronald, if Harry wants to buy you something, let him!” Seeing his mutinous expression, she sighed. “Dear, he’s not giving you charity, he’s offering because he loves you like a brother and, for the first time in his life, he has the means to buy something for his family. I want you to think about this. For the first ten years of his life he lived locked up in a cupboard, forced to wear clothing that was stained in his own blood, without a penny to his name. According to Harry, his Uncle even took the money he earned this past summer. You will not give him a hard time about this Ronald. Harry just wants to share what he has with you, its not charity...”

Turning to Ginny and leaving Ron thinking very hard she continued in a softer tone.

“Ginny dear, I have no doubt how Harry feels about you and how you feel about him. While we’re supposed to allow our men to spoil us once in a while, please remember he’s not supposed to bankrupt himself doing it...Oh and dear, be sure you help him pick out some nice clothes to wear for himself.”

Ginny’s jaw dropped open, then she grinned at her mum. Molly turned to her twins with a pained look.

“As for you two. DO NOT PRANK HIM. I ask you to give Harry at least ‘til summer break before you let your twisted minds run wild. Right now, he’s going to need time to adjust and your pranks won’t help him. I can’t tell you all he’s been through, but he needs time to feel like he belongs here...”

Finally Molly turned on Arthur and stared at him. “Well?”

“Um... nothing dear. I’ll floo Remus and inform him of our plans for tomorrow.”

She smiled at him and nodded. “Do that Arthur. I’m sure Remus won’t mind and he can inform Professor Dumbledore so appropriate arrangements can be made. When we get home, we’ll burn these clothes of his in a little ceremony.”

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### **Private Conversations at the Burrow...**

Molly and Arthur sat at the kitchen table, watching the newest addition to their family wear a hold in the floor. Harry had asked them if he could have a private word with them, so Ginny and Ron had excused themselves.

Molly and Arthur had spoken earlier in the week about some of the things they thought Harry might want to talk about. Now, with the two of them sitting at the table, and Harry pacing nervously trying to figure out how to begin, the two watched him carefully.

Finally Harry sighed and started.

“I’m probably going to say a lot of stuff wrong here, so please, don’t misunderstand me. If I’m not clear on something, please tell me... First I want to say that the Burrow is one of the few places I’ve been in our world where I’ve felt safe and at peace. I feel I should thank you for taking me in. The two of you mean the world to me and I would do anything for either of you...”

Molly stopped his pacing by grabbing him on his return trip to the other side of the kitchen and hugging him from her chair. Harry smiled down at her before continuing.

“There are some things which I’m going to need your help on. Not because I can’t do them, but because I don’t know how. I’m sure things would have been different if I weren’t raised as a muggle, but I know so little about our world. I honestly don’t understand why it’s so important that Hogwarts teaches what happened to Nastil the Noseless and his armies in 978AD but they don’t teach the basics of our world...”

Arthur looked at Molly, and then asked Harry what he meant. Harry ran his hand through his hair in frustration.

“It’s this wedding on Monday. Remus has asked me to stand with him, to be his second...” Now his tone turned appealing. “... I’ve never been to a muggle wedding let alone a wizard one! I don’t know what I’m supposed to do!”

Molly and Arthur smiled at that and Arthur said. “I’ll explain the process to you on Sunday Harry. It’s not really a big deal, but I do see what you mean. I’ll try to explain some of our traditions to you, but I want you to promise me something. If you’re ever confronted with something you don’t understand, you’ll ask me. Alright?”

Harry looked relieved and nodded at Arthur. Taking a deep breath, he spoke again in a serious tone.

“I want you two to know, if you need anything, ever, you can come to me. Remus told me you two probably wouldn’t allow me to give you some of my money. But your family to me and families help each other. Whenever I can do anything for you, just tell me. Please? I know how much you’re helping me. I just want to be able to help back when it’s needed.”

“Harry, Arthur and I talked about this before you came home,” Molly replied. “And you’re right; we probably would not have accepted your money. But you’re also right that families help each

other. In the event that it becomes necessary, we will allow you to help us. Is that acceptable Harry dear?"

Harry looked relieved at that. It wasn't quite what he wanted to do, but it was close enough.

Harry started pacing again. Now came the really hard part. *Well, Gryffindors forward and all that...* he thought.

Harry stopped suddenly and fidgeted, his carefully memorized speech forgotten.

"I'd also like to talk about um... Ginny..."

Arthur and Molly exchanged a knowing look. This was one topic they had talked about in considerable detail and had reached an agreement on several points. One of them was, they weren't going to make this easy for Harry. The twins, it seemed, weren't the only ones who enjoyed a good prank.

Molly asked in a concerned voice, "What about Ginny, dear? Is something wrong with her?"

Harry looked up startled. "No... no... there's nothing wrong with Ginny, she's great... she's super... no I mean she's very special to me..." he trailed off again.

Arthur spoke in a sterner tone. "Special? What are you talking about Harry?"

*Damn this isn't going the way I thought it would, Harry thought. I thought it would be easier than this. Right now I'd rather be taking on a dozen Death Eaters than talk to my girlfriends parents!*

"Well... we um... we love each other." he managed to gasp out.

Molly was fighting to keep a straight face. She was certain of what was coming, but she wanted to hear Harry say it. Arthur, on the other hand, decided that a little more torture was in order.

"That's nice Harry, but what has that got to do with whatever you're trying to say?" He asked.

Harry straightened up and blurted it out,  
"I want to marry your daughter and I'm asking for your permission."

Molly looked at Arthur for a moment with a smug grin on her face thinking, *that's five galleons you owe me. I told you he'd bring this up on the first night here.*

Molly looked back at Harry and told him she hadn't quite understood what he'd just said.

Harry took another breath and said, "I want to marry your daughter and I'm asking for your permission."

Molly squeezed her husband's hand, but kept silent. As they had previously agreed, they wanted to hear Harry's plan before giving him an answer. Molly was barely able to contain herself however. What she really wanted to do was shriek "YES!" before hugging the stuffing out of the young man before her.

Harry looked at the two. Molly looked ready to explode, and Arthur looked at him like he was some kind of bug that may need to be squashed.

Harry groaned to himself. He's screwed this up. He just knew it. They would hate him now!

"Harry? Perhaps you should tell us your plans, first," Arthur said, trying to remain firm.

Harry nearly fainted in relief. He did sway a bit, actually.

"Well sir, I thought I would give Ginny a promise ring before Christmas, and then replace that with an engagement ring at her next birthday. I thought we'd either get married after I graduate, or wait until she graduated. We'd both really like to get married after I graduate, but we're willing to wait if necessary. I'd like to teach at Hogwarts and Professor Dumbledore told me that if my grades stay as good as they are, he'd be willing to take me on as a Junior Professor for the Defense Against the Dark Arts class. He mentioned that the position would come with a nice apartment in the castle, and that would be suitable for a while. But I'd really like to build a home Ginny would like in Hogsmeade."

He held his breath. Arthur tipped back in his chair, staring at the ceiling for a long while. Molly still clutched his hand tightly, bone crushingly tight in fact.

*Damn, it's a well thought out plan he has and I can't really fault it, Arthur thought. Ginny would be able to continue with school even if they did get married after he graduated. I know he has the means to see she's taken care of, and any children they might have. Being a teacher isn't the most glamorous thing in the world but he's picking something he'd enjoy doing, not something he'd be doing just to put food on the table. Besides, Molly and I did something similar since she was a year behind me.*

Arthur looked back down at Harry and said, "I suppose if we didn't give you permission you'd just wait until she's of age and go ahead anyway?"

Harry looked him straight in the eye, speaking man to man now. "Arthur, I wouldn't like doing it that way. But if that's the only way to do it, that's exactly what we'd do."

Arthur nodded; he could hear the steel in Harry's voice. Harry stood there; his arms crossed now, no longer a boy, but a young man who would go to any lengths to reach his goal.

Arthur and Molly exchanged a glance, and then turned back to Harry smiling. Molly spoke, "Harry, of course you have our blessing. We just wanted to be sure you had thought this through."

Harry swayed with relief and thought, *make that two dozen death eaters...*

He gave the both of them a weak and very relieved smile.

"However," Molly added, causing Harry to stiffen slightly. "I think it would be best if you waited until after Ginny graduated. Don't get me wrong, dear. Arthur and I are thrilled. But a young couple is not always as cautious as they should be."

At his puzzled expression, she explained in her blunt manner. “Do you really want Ginny taking her N.E.W.T’s while pregnant?”

Harry gaped at her and his face went up in flames. *Pregnant? That would mean Ginny and I would have to...and her parents know that we’d have too... Oh Merlin! No one should have to talk to their future in-laws about having sex with their daughter! Maybe the floor will open up and swallow me...maybe Death Eater’s will attack the Burrow...This isn’t happening...*

“Harry? Harry, dear? Harry!”

Harry jerked back to reality and blinked furiously. “We’ll wa...wait ‘til she graduates,” he croaked.

“Wonderful!” Molly said before leaping up and hugging him. Arthur stood and gave his arm a pat, saying “Good man.”

The three of them left the kitchen a short time later to find Ron sitting on the couch, watching his sister pace back and forth nervously, wringing her hands. Ron didn’t know what was bothering Ginny, but Ginny had a good idea what was coming when Harry had asked to speak privately with her parents.

Ginny stopped in her pacing and looked anxiously at the three of them. Harry beamed at her and she squealed, rushing over to hug him. Then she turned to her parents and hugged them both. The four of them started talking to each other, babbling really.

Ron watched in bewilderment for a few moments while the four jabbered before deciding to find out what is going on.

“Have you all gone barking mad or something? Someone tell me what’s going on!”

Molly frowned at Ron’s language, but said in a calm voice, “Ron dear, Harry here just asked for your sister’s hand. They’ll be formally engaged at her next birthday.”

Ron’s eye’s bugged out of his head, and without giving much thought to what he was going to say, always a mistake for him, he replied, “I know he’s been dating her, but why would he want to marry her?”

Molly bellowed, “RONALD WEASLEY!” She then chased him as he sprinted for his room.

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### **Hermione and Her Parents...**

Hermione was uneasy her first night home. She missed Ron desperately and she missed being able to spend some time with Ginny in the dorm. Something wasn’t quite right here at home, but she couldn’t figure out what it was. Her mother had grilled her on Ron; well, not really grilled. It was more like an uncomfortable girl-to-girl talk.

Emma wanted to know more about Ron. They had met Molly and Arthur Weasley before, both at Grimmauld Place and at Platform 9 and  $\frac{3}{4}$ , and liked them, even if Arthur did seemed a bit odd.



Emma hinted around at some very intimate questions, and Hermione tried to answer honestly. She and her mum had always been close. But the conversation tonight had been one sided. Emma didn't even try to hide her evasions to Hermione's questions about her and Dan.

Trying to distract herself from the uneasy feeling, she reviewed a conversation she'd had with Ginny in the dorm one night not too long ago. They were sitting in Ginny's bed and Ginny was trying to braid Hermione's hair. It was an attempt that was best described as only partial successful.

*"So, how are things with you and Ron 'Mione?" Ginny asked.*

*"Sometimes I'm walking on air Ginny, and sometimes I want to strangle that boy! He doesn't have a romantic bone in his body!"*

*"Ron can be bloody dense at times. Merlin knows you two would still be sitting at the table at the dance if Harry and I hadn't intervened on your part."*

*Hermione smiled at the memory of that. "How about you Ginny? Harry doesn't strike me as the really romantic type."*

*Ginny giggled and mumbled something.*

*Hermione turned around to face her. "Ginny? What aren't you telling me?"*

*Ginny told Hermione of the time Harry had given the DA the night off, and how she had found an invitation to a cozy romantic dinner served by Dobby. She mentioned the music playing, the dancing, and the long conversation on the couch.*

*Hermione ate this up eagerly. She never suspected that Harry could be so romantic. She looked at Ginny expectantly "And? Ginevra Weasley, don't tell me he ran away again!"*

*Ginny mumbled something that Hermione couldn't make out. "Ginny... I didn't quite hear that."*

*Ginny whispered "No, he didn't run away, but things...well... let's just say that things didn't quite progress as far as I would have liked... but still it was a breakthrough for us... Oh Merlin why did I pick a man with such a strong sense of honor?"*

*"Ginny that's one of the things you love about him isn't it?"*

*Ginny nodded.*

Hermione slipped into a troubled sleep while still remembering that conversation. It led her to some...interesting dreams...involving Ron and the Room of Requirement.

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### **Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes...**

George and Fred returned to their shop in Diagon Alley. They had converted the loft above the shop into a combination potions lab and an apartment. Both men were starting to feel better. It

had been days since they'd received the notice from the Marauders, and nothing had happened since that first notice had come in.

An hour or so after their return home, Angelina Johnson entered the lower shop and shouted for Fred. She and Fred had been dating since Hogwarts.

"Oy! Fred where are you?" She shouted.

"UP HERE! HELP!"

Angelina ran up the stairs, wand at the ready. At the top of the stairs, she stopped, confused.

Fred was standing in the middle of the room looking desperate. From the bathroom came another muffled voice, shouting for help. Floating around the room was a set of glowing letters that read:

MARAUDERS RULE, WEASLEY'S DROOL!

"Fred? What are you on about?"

"I can't move my feet. I'm stuck to the floor. It's obviously a prank," he said, pointing at the floating words. "And a timed one at that. I can't even take my shoe off!"

"And George is..."

"YES! He is stuck to the johnny!" He said, looking very sheepish.

Angelina snickered. At Fred's pleading expression, the snickers turned to chuckles. When he scowled at her in irritation, she collapsed on the floor laughing hysterically.

From the loo, barely heard over the sounds of laughter, came an indignant plea for help.

Back in the Burrow, Harry turned over on his bed, half asleep he murmured "Mischief Managed" before falling back asleep.

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### **Diagon Alley and Muggle London...**

Harry's day began early. Molly, Ron and Ginny would accompany him to Gringots first. Then he had 2 stops he needed to make in Diagon Alley before they'd proceed into muggle London. Tonks would meet them at the Leaky Cauldron and act as both an escort, as well as a guide.

Arriving at the Leaky Cauldron, Tonks was already there and, surprisingly for once, she was dressed in nearly normal muggle clothes. From the Leaky Cauldron they went to Gringots where Harry asked for Griphook.

The short goblin appeared. Spotting Harry he gave him a toothy grin.

"Mr. Potter, so nice to see you again! How can I be of service to you today?"

“Griphook, can you take my family and myself to the Potter Family vault?”

“Of course, Mr. Potter. If you would all follow me this way please?”

Griphook led the group to a small waiting cart. Harry told them it would be best if they all waited until he had opened the doors before they exited the cart, but that they were welcome to follow him into the vault if they wished. Ginny looked very curious, as did Ron, but both decided to stay in the cart. Molly was so busy grilling Tonks about her upcoming wedding that neither adult seemed interested.

After a short trip they arrived at the vault. Like his last visit, the vault doors opened as he approached them.

Harry vanished inside for a while. Molly glanced away from Tonks for a moment to look towards the vault, and then stared in amazement.

Tonks smirked at the older woman’s surprise and leaned over to her to whisper, “This is only the Potter money vault. There are three others, including two from the Black family.”

In a few moments, Harry exited the vault and watched as the doors swung closed before getting back into the cart for the return trip. Once back in Gringots, Harry exchanged most of the Galleons for pounds. From there, he went to Eeylops Owl Emporium to purchase a Tawny owl and a complete set of supplies. The owl he sent to the Burrow. Before leaving Diagon Alley, he had Molly distract Tonks long enough for him to duck into TerrorTours.

The rest of the day was spent running around Harrod’s of London. Harry purchased a complete set of clothes and, based on Tonks’ advice, two muggle dress suits. He made sure Ron and Ginny picked up a couple items as well. Ginny picked up several very pretty dresses and one or two items that made Harry blush eight shades of red. Once they left Harrod’s, Harry had one more mission to accomplish. Finding a florist, he handed Ron some money and sent him inside with instructions to send Hermione flowers.

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### **Back at the Burrow...**

Exhausted from the day of shopping, the four thanked Tonks for her help, and then returned to the Burrow. Harry dropped to the couch heavily and said, “Man it’s great to be home.” Closing his eyes for a moment, he missed the smiles that lit both Molly and Ginny’s faces.

After dinner, Harry helped Molly clean up the dishes and then excused himself, saying he had something he wanted to work on.

Molly looked at Arthur, who nodded at her. Listening to Ron and Ginny exclaim over their first real muggle-shopping trip for a few minutes longer, he finally stood and excused himself, heading for Harry’s room.

Arthur knocked on Harry’s door and entered. Harry was working at his table; he had parchments all over the place. When Harry looked up, he grabbed a chair, pulled it over to the desk. Sitting, he looked over Harry’s drawings with great interest. He had heard from the school that Harry had

shown a talent for drawing that he applied to his schoolwork, but this was a side of Harry that Arthur hadn't seen. Molly wanted him to check up on Harry, to see how he was doing, but this was interesting.

"My word Harry, these are quite good. But can I ask you what you're doing?"

"These are ring designs, Sir."

"Now Harry, call me Arthur, please. We did talk about this remember?"

Harry nodded then began discussing the parchments again.

"These are possible designs for Ginny's ring, Arthur. I can't seem to decide which one to use though. Should it be complex or simple, elegant, fancy or plain? I'm just not sure."

"Well, wouldn't the more complex design take longer for a jeweler to make, Harry? That's one of the things I have to admit to wondering about. If you're going to have the ring made it will never be done in time."

Harry looked embarrassed, but he replied, "Actually, I was planning on making the ring myself. But I do see where you're coming from. A simpler ring would allow for a more complex arrangement when it's merged with an engagement ring and a wedding ring."

Arthur seemed a bit taken aback by Harry's comments about making the ring himself. When Harry noticed his expression, he showed Arthur his Phoenix Ring and described how he had made it during class one day. Arthur was amazed at the depth of detail in it.

*Amazing!* Arthur thought. *He could be one of the finest Wizarding jewelers in the world if he wanted to be, but he wants to teach children. And he's going to make Ginny's ring himself. Molly will want to see this. I'll tell her to ask him about it another day.*

"I'm really impressed Harry. The level of detail you've put into this ring and these drawings is superb! I'm sure whatever design you decide, Ginny will love it, especially since you made it yourself. I really only came in here to see how you were settling in, and now I find myself amazed. I wish Ron had talent like this!"

"Arthur, Ron has plenty of talent. He's most likely going to be one of the greatest professional keepers of all time. But Ron has a lot more talent than just being able to fly a broom or catch a quaffle. He's loyal and brave, but more importantly, he has a mind made for thinking strategically. If you don't believe me, try playing Wizard's Chess with him. In six years, I've never been able to beat him."

Arthur suddenly felt ashamed. He hadn't meant to belittle Ron, but Harry had forced him to see his son in a whole new light.

"Yes, you're right Harry. And I thank you for pointing that out to me. Sometimes we parents only see what we want to see. Well, I'll leave you to your designing."

Arthur left the room and almost immediately Ginny entered. She didn't know what her dad had been talking to Harry about, or what the drawings on the table were for, but she didn't really care. All she knew was FINALLY she had Harry alone, even if it was only for a few minutes. She sat on his lap, wiggled a little to make sure she had his attention, and then wrapped her arms around him and kissed him soundly.

When they came up for air, she turned to look at the parchments Harry had been working on. She flipped through them one at a time while Harry held his breath. He didn't tell her what the images represented. Finally, she settled on a very simple design. It started as a single banded ring, which was then placed into a double-banded insert, and then ultimately, another insert.

"This one is really pretty Harry!"

Harry smiled at her broadly then distracted her by nibbling on her neck. Inwardly, he was very pleased; she had just solved his problem for him. Now he wouldn't stay up all night drawing designs. The two sat kissing and holding each other for a while before Ginny said goodnight.

Harry crawled into his bed a short while after Ginny left. His first full day at home had been a success.

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### **Wedding bells...**

Monday started with bright sunshine. Harry had had a wonderfully relaxing weekend, even getting more sleep than usual. He hadn't had a single nightmare since leaving school. And more importantly, his scar hadn't twinged even once since coming home.

Chaos reigned supreme that morning in the Burrow. Fred and George arrived just after breakfast, along with their dates. Everyone was rushing like mad around to get ready for the noon Ceremony.

Molly had laid out Harry's green robe for the service. Ginny would wear her matching robe as well. Harry was nervous; one of his duties involved a ceremonial lighting during the service; and of course to hold the rings for Remus. The ring holding he was ok with, but the lighting ceremony involved a long incantation that he kept repeating under his breath.

Finally everyone was ready. They had cut it close because Molly was convinced that she could do something with Harry's hair. But once again his hair won the day, against overwhelming odds.

With seconds to spare, everyone grabbed onto the rope portkey that Arthur held. Harry felt that familiar tug and away they went. Remus breathed a sigh of relief when they showed up, and for once Harry actually managed to stay on his feet. Although to be honest, he did stumble and probably would have fallen had Ginny not steadied him.

Ron smirked, saying, "To the world he's super wizard, but he can't ride a simple portkey!" Harry shot him a grin back.

They all trooped into the living room which had been magically transformed into a small chapel. Hermione rushed up to Ron and wrapped her arms around him, thanking him for the flowers. Ron

got a goofy grin on his face and Harry winked at him. Harry waved to Neville and Luna, then spotted Jack and gave him a huge smile. He was glad that Remus had befriended the man after Harry had gone to school. Harry felt a little sad that Jack was alone.

Jack waved back at Harry. They'd get a chance to talk after the service.

Remus pressed a small box into Harry's hand and whispered, "The rings, don't lose them!" Harry nodded and pocketed the box. Dumbledore was up by the fireplace. He coughed politely and called everyone to attention. He would be the one officiating this ceremony.

"If I might have everyone's attention please? I would like to go over what will happen here for the benefit of our muggle friends attending. The ceremony you will see here has little parallel to weddings you are used to. Nymphadora has asked Molly Weasley to stand with her, and Remus has asked Harry Potter to stand with him. At the appropriate times, Molly will invoke an incantation of joining over the ceremonial cup and Harry will light the cup. The act of joining over the cup signifies the love and the bond the couple shares for each other. The lighting ceremony signifies the love the couple has for their friends and families present here today. Then the rings will be exchanged, completing the service. It is in many ways simpler than what many are used to, but far more profound as there is powerful magic that will be at work today."

Emma and Dan Granger's eyes lit up. They loved watching magic at work. Jack looked interested and had the amused look of a bachelor watching a friend go to his fate.

At some unknown signal, Dumbledore once again asked for everyone's attention and he announced that everything was ready to proceed. People quickly scurried to take their seats.

Harry stood off to the side of Remus with Dumbledore. The doors to the room swung silently open and Tonks walked in, dressed in a white robe. Music started to play in the background from some hidden source. As Molly followed Tonks up to stand in front of Dumbledore, the old wizard began to speak.

"Since the age of Merlin the joining of Witch and Wizard has been a celebration of life and love. Today, we join in celebrating the marriage of Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin. Both have suffered through adversity to reach this point in their lives, where they may celebrate their love for all to see. We friends and family bear witness to this union and join with them in celebrating the joy they have found in each other. By tradition, the union is celebrated by the ringing of bells..."

Dumbledore signaled to Molly, who then cast an incantation over the cup. The music stopped and, from a distance, two ringing bells were heard. As everyone listened, the two bells slowly synchronized to become one clear, sweet sound.

"Also by tradition," Dumbledore continued, "the couple shares their love with their friend and family by the lighting of the cup..."

Harry moved forward to the cup and Dumbledore smiled encouragingly at him. He pulled his wand and concentrated as hard as he could on thoughts of Remus, Tonks and his new family.

Murmuring the incantation '*promeritum maritus blandior ignis*', he released the magic into the cup. The cup glowed golden for a moment, and then the liquid started to whirl within. Sparkles,

almost like a host of fireflies, rose above the rim. The music altered from the popular wedding music it had been playing, to some angelic choir. The sparkles continued to rise, slowly filling the room with millions of tiny flashing lights as the music rose to a soaring crescendo.

Stepping back, Harry noted the stunned expressions of the onlookers and heard the murmurs of surprise. Thinking he'd messed up, he looked to Dumbledore. The old wizard smiled at him, his eyes twinkling merrily. With a wink, Dumbledore turned back to the crowd. Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"My friends, I think we are truly fortunate today. This union has been blessed indeed. Now, might I have the rings?"

Harry fumbled in his pocket for a moment, nearly pulling out the wrong box. Handing the box to the Headmaster, he watched as Dumbledore removed the rings and placed them carefully on his wand.

Nymphadora and Remus pulled out their own wands and held them out towards Dumbledore's. When all three wands touched, the rings were transferred; the bride's ring on the groom's wand, the groom's ring on the bride's wand.

Remus removed the ring from his wand and took Nymphadora's hand. She trembled at his touch and her eyes became misty. Remus placed the ring onto her finger and said, "I bind myself to thee. Let this ring be a symbol of our union and our love. In front of these witnesses, I pledge thee my heart and soul."

Nymphadora smiled at Remus and removed the ring from her wand. Placing the ring on Remus's finger, she repeated his words back to him. "I bind myself to thee. Let this ring be a symbol of our union and our love. In front of these witnesses, I pledge thee my heart and soul."

The couple held hands and turned to face the crowd, in a room that still sparkled, as Dumbledore once again spoke.

"Friends and family allow me to introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Remus Lupin, life mates and lovers; sealed by their bond and witnessed by our presence."

The room broke into applause and Remus leaned over and kissed Tonks on the cheek. Unlike muggle weddings, wizard weddings had no formal bride kissing tradition. Dumbledore announced that with the exception of the newlyweds, the Weasley's and Hermione Granger, everyone should move into the banquet hall next door.

Harry gulped nervously now. He knew her parents and Dumbledore should be present, but didn't expect Hermione and the twins, nor Remus and Tonks. In fact, most people seemed to be watching, reluctant to move! Only Dumbledore and the Weasley's knew what was going on. But the others sensed that the show wasn't over and didn't leave the room.

Dumbledore, and the others in the know, sensed Harry's discomfort. But there was little that could be done about it short of shoving people out.

Molly pushed Ginny forward to stand next to Harry. Ginny was one of those that didn't have clue what was about to happen. Dumbledore looked at Ginny with a slight smile, his eyes twinkling like mad.

"Ginny," Dumbledore said, "Harry has something he wishes to tell you."

Ginny turned to Harry, who at this point looked like he wanted to crawl under a rock. Hermione's eyes were bugging out of her head, her hands up to her mouth trying to hide a smile. She wasn't sure what was coming either, but she had a suspicion.

Harry straightened his shoulders and looked at Ginny, smiling. His mother's letter, safe in its locket around his neck radiated approving warmth.

He had studied this particular subject very closely before deciding on how he was going to proceed. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew the box with the rings he had made. Then he began the ancient ritual of Coolar, the promise binding. Ginny's eyes widened as she saw the rings and their design. It was the design she'd picked as her favorite that night in Harry's room! Hermione gasped, her own eyes misting over. Both Remus and Tonks were gawking at the two of them.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley, with this ring I, Harry James Potter, pledge unto thee my love undying. I give thee this ring in promise that on the eve of thy sixteenth birthday, we shall be betrothed."

Harry removed the center ring from the two inserts and placed it on her finger.

"Take this ring and kept it as pledge for a life to come. Know that it is a promise of a future and a symbol of what I feel for thee."

The ring flared brightly for a moment. When the flame died, the center stone continued to pulse softly, beating in time with Harry's heartbeat.

Ginny, tears sliding down her cheeks, gave Harry a trembling smile before throwing herself into his embrace.

Molly sniffled and Arthur handed her a tissue.

Dumbledore placed a hand on the head of each of them, smiling broadly. Then he spoke to those assembled. "I have witnessed the ritual of Coolar many times in my duties of Headmaster, yet few are blessed with so powerful a bonding. Young love in these most troubled of times can be a beautiful thing. It represents hope, and dreams."

Turning slightly to Harry he said softly, "Once I told you that it does not do to dwell on dreams. But you have confused dreams with goals Harry. A dream is something impossible; a goal is possible. Today, you have proven me wrong by turning a dream into a goal."

Still holding Ginny, all he could do was nod at the Headmaster.



When they finally broke the embrace and looked around, they saw that the chapel was still full of people, and everyone was smiling at them. With Ginny in hand, Harry followed the newlyweds into the banquet hall.

Hermione approached Ginny while people were getting settled. The two hugged and Hermione said, "I can't believe you kept this from me!"

"Mione, I would have told you, but to be honest, I wasn't sure when Harry was going to do this. He only asked my parents for permission a couple days ago. I thought he'd do it over Christmas or something. I never dreamed he'd be brave enough to do it today, right after the wedding with all these people present!"

Harry walked over and took Ginny's hand again. Hermione looked at Harry and said "I'm so happy for you two!"

Harry hugged her and told her not to worry, that her turn will come soon enough.

"Will it really Harry? I love Ron, but somehow I figure I'm not among Ron's top ten list."

"Mione, would you be willing to listen to advice from your brother?"

She eyed Harry warily, and then eventually nodded in consent.

"Ron loves you to pieces Mione, but he feels he's not worthy of you. Heck, there are days I feel the same, that I'm not worthy of Ginny. Ron's problem is that he always feels that way. Tell you what, think about how you treat him, think hard about how you're always correcting him, and try to moderate that a little. In the meantime, I'll give him my crash course in how to treat you right. Who knows? You might even find yourself enjoying a pleasant evening in the Room of Requirement like I did with Ginny."

Ginny snorted into her drink, nearly spraying butterbeer all over the place. He didn't know about her conversation with Hermione or what she had divulged.

Harry, on the other hand, didn't understand why Hermione had turned almost scarlet. Hermione's eyes narrowed and she looked at Harry.

"You made him send me flowers, didn't you?"

"Let's just say I nudged him in the right direction. And I'm going to keep on nudging him until it becomes second nature to him."

Ginny sighed and said wistfully, "It must be nice to have someone give you flowers."

Harry grinned at her, and then looked around impishly before conjuring up a single white lily, which he placed behind her ear. Ginny, remembering what the lily meant to them, blushed again.

"Do you honestly think Ron will get the hint, Harry?" Hermione asked, drawing his attention once again.

“Honestly, I don’t know ‘Mione. But I’m going to pound it into Ron if I have to. You’re too important to me to let this slide. I don’t like what he’s been doing to you of late. Or should I say not doing? Just think about what I said. You work on your end and I’ll see if I can break through to Ron.”

Seeing the newlyweds waiting to talk to Harry, Hermione hugged them both and went off in search of her parents.

Remus and Tonks came over and Harry hugged them. Then he had to ask the one question that had been bugging him all night.

“Remus, why did everyone seem surprised during the lighting ceremony?”

Remus blinked at him and Tonks blurted out, “Harry ,don’t you know what you did?”

Ginny looked at Harry in surprise.

“Um... no? What did I do?”

Tonks rolled her eyes and said, “Harry, in most lighting ceremonies the cup glows gold and that’s it. When you invoked the incantation, you didn’t just make the cup glow, you invoked Merlin’s Blessing. Remember the chorus singing and the room full of sparkling lights? It wasn’t your magic that did it this time, but your feelings for Remus and myself. Legend has it that Merlin’s Blessing can take two souls and join them as soul mates...”

With that last statement, she looked shyly at Remus and ran the back of her hand softly against his cheek before continuing.

“Even if we forget what legend says, Merlin’s Blessing is extraordinarily powerful magic. It strengthens and seals our bond in ways that are hard to describe. You gave us a gift that cannot be measured in money or words.”

Harry reached into his pocket, pulled out a parchment and said, “Oh then you won’t be wanting this wedding present that Ginny and I have for you?”

Ginny looked startled and turned to stare at Harry.

Remus chuckled and Tonks looked sheepish. Harry handed her the parchment. Tonks read it, gasped, and then flung her arms around Harry.

Remus pried the parchment out of Tonks’ hands. His eyes widened and he read aloud,

“A Thirty day wizards cruise, deluxe honeymoon accommodations.”

Ginny joined Tonks in the hug while Remus looked on, simply smiling at the three of them. Once the three broke apart, Remus grabbed Harry, hugged him tight and expressed his gratitude for everything the young man had done.

As Remus and Tonks moved off to wander among their guests, Ginny sat down. Harry asked her to save him a seat, as he wanted to have a quick word with his friend Jack.

Harry didn't have much time to talk, but he made sure that Jack would indeed be coming to the Burrow with Remus and Tonks on Christmas day. A short time later, Harry returned to his seat to enjoy a fine meal in honor of Remus and Tonks.

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### **Christmas Day...**

Harry woke to the sound of pounding feet. It was Christmas! He fumbled for his glasses and put on a robe. He went to his trunk and wandlessly expanded the gifts he had made.

Picking up pile of gifts, he walked down the stairs. Not quite knowing what Christmas traditions his new family followed, he put the gifts under the tree with the others, leaving them in a single pile, and then joined everyone for a holiday breakfast.

After breakfast the gifts were opened. The best gift he received came when Ginny hid his eyes and steer him over to the family clock. When she released his eyes, he saw his name had been added to the clock. It was currently listed as 'AT HOME. SAFE!'

That caused quite a few tears from Harry, Molly, Ginny and even Arthur.

Harry's gift to Molly and Arthur was another cause for sensation and another round of tears. Harry had made a set of decorative plates for them. He done his research at the school library and found what the crest of the Weasley clan was. Using that information, he had decorated the edges of each plate with the Weasley crest. The interior of each plate contained a hand painted drawing of each of the children, including Percy. His own portrait had a slightly different edge decoration as he alternated the Weasley crest with the Potter crest.

When Molly realized that Harry had made each of these by hand, she choked up. With trembling hands she pulled out each plate and examined the portraits carefully. Finally reaching for the last plate, she saw it was one of himself. She carefully examined the detail of the alternating crests, and then put it down carefully with the others so she could pull Harry into a fierce hug.

Fawkes arrived when they finished with the gifts. Harry was prepared for this. He took the package from Fawkes and gave him another to take to Dumbledore.

He opened the package to find a note and a pensieve, smaller than the one Dumbledore used, but quite nice.

*Harry,*

*This is the first pensieve I ever owned. Now, I pass it to you. You will find the pensieve an excellent way of ordering your thoughts and reviewing memories to see things you might have missed. It's also quite fun at parties!*

*The Headmaster of Hogwarts has given this pensieve to many students who ultimately held the position of Headmaster. Perhaps someday, you too will hold that position and pass this pensieve on to a favored student. Nothing could please me more.*

*Enjoy your Holiday, Harry.*  
*Albus Dumbledore*

Since company wouldn't be arriving until late in the afternoon, the family spent a pleasant morning sitting in the living room. Harry sat on the couch in front of the fire, sandwiched between Ginny and Molly, reading.

Ginny was dozing already, leaning against Harry. The fire was making Harry drowsy. Without even realizing what he was doing, he closed his book and started to doze as well.

Molly, who had been knitting next to Harry, was somewhat surprised when Harry started leaning against her. She shifted slightly and placed an arm around him. Arthur, seeing this, could only smile.

Later that afternoon Remus, Tonks and Harry's friend Jack Parsons arrived at the Burrow for dinner. Harry gave Jack the tawny owl he had purchased from Eeylops, along with a complete set of supplies and a book, "OWLS; Care and Feeding for Muggles." Jack named his owl Hoots.

Harry watched with delight as Arthur and Jack seemed to become friends almost instantly. The two sat firing questions at each other about their own respective worlds. Then Arthur insisted on showing Jack his collection of Plugs, Combs and Batteries. Arthur also seemed quite interested in Jack's cane.

As Jack sat with Arthur and Molly at the kitchen table, Harry showed Remus and Tonks his room.

"Harry's a good kid. I really enjoyed the time we spent together this summer. I never could have gotten that house livable without his help. Did you know he helped me get my first chocolate frog in nearly forty years? It was wonderful." Jack exclaimed

Molly smiled. She'd been a nervous at first with this stranger. But she was coming to like this strange American with his funny accent. He broke the ice with Molly by bringing a dish of food to the dinner. Candied Yams he called them, and everyone agreed they were quite good.

Molly frowned for a moment then spoke. "Yes, I just don't understand how he turned out as well as he did, considering his home life."

"Just what was the deal with that anyway? I could see there was some kind of problem between Harry and his uncle, but I could never get him to open up about it."

Molly looked at Arthur. He placed a hand on her shoulder and said quietly, "His Uncle was abusing him. He showed up at school this year severely beaten. He very nearly died. We only found out a few days ago that his Uncle took all the money Harry earned from you and never gave him a single quid."

Jack's face darkened and his hands balled up into fists. He leaned forward towards the two adult Weasleys and hissed, "And what happened to the Dursley's? I know the house is up for sale."

"His Aunt died in prison and we believe his uncle also. The boy had his memory erased and was sent to live with his aunt. Not too long ago, dark forces attacked the prison and many prisoners

escaped. The prison was largely destroyed and there were a number of unidentifiable bodies. It's thought that his uncle was among those unidentified," Arthur replied.

At that point, Harry entered the kitchen with Remus and Tonks in tow. Jack grabbed Harry by an arm and told him in a steely voice. "Harry, next time you're in trouble, you either talk to me or I'm going to kick your butt! OK?" Harry looked bewildered for a moment and then Jack grabbed Harry in a bone-crushing hug.

All in all, this Christmas was a success in Harry's book.

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### **Hermione at Home, 2 days after Christmas...**

Hermione stepped from the bathroom wearing a nightshirt and toweling her hair dry. Glancing down the stairs as she padded into her bedroom, she saw her parents on the couch, still watching the telly.

She walked over to the bed and sat down, still working on trying to dry her hair. It was at that point she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. The Dark Mark detector she had borrowed for some holiday research was blinking softly. Grabbing a robe, she snatched the crystal and her wand of the desk and bolted for the door.

"MUM! DAD!" She cried, pelting down the stairs. "We have to leave now!"

She grabbed her mother by the hand and started tugging her towards the library. Dan Granger stood up, looking around. Pushing and shoving them towards the library, ignoring their questions, she suddenly jerked to a stop as the house trembled.

"MOVE!" She barked at her gawking parents, giving them a mighty shove into the room as the wards around the house came crashing down.

Slamming the library door closed, she grabbed her parent's arms, yelling "Move! Come on, damn it. Get to the fireplace!" Hermione's work with the DA paid off. The training they'd gone through thus far allowed her to do what needed to be done, without panicking. That would come later.

There was a loud crash from the front of the house. The house shook, violently. The sound of fire could be easily heard, as could the sound of harsh voices barking commands.

"Find them!"

Hermione pushed her parents to the fireplace and handed her father the pot of floo powder.

"The Burrow, quick! There's no time!"

The library door burst open and Hermione turned, firing off a bludgeoning spell. The figure in the doorway jerked back out of sight.

Dan threw the floo powder into the fireplace and he and Emma stepped in. Hermione turned and sprinted to join them. As she ran, a cutting curse hit her mid back and she stumbled into her parents arms, gasping, "The Burrow!"

In a green flash they were gone. The living room quickly filled with Death Eaters. The leader looked at the rest and snarled, "Follow them!"

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### **The Burrow...**

Harry was sitting on the couch reading "Quidditch Through the Ages", when his locket gave a warning jerk against his chest and his phoenix ring went cold.

He sprang to his feet and whirled to Ron and Ginny. "Get your wands, now!"

Molly and Arthur looked concerned, but both pulled their own wands out. Ron and Ginny bolted for their rooms. Harry stood tense, every nerve, and every sense screaming a warning.

"Something bad is happening, and it's coming this way," he warned.

Ron and Ginny scrambled back down the stairs, wands at the ready. Everyone looked around nervous and tense.

The fireplace suddenly flared to life and Dan and Emma stumbled out. Emma was weeping and Dan was holding a limp Hermione in his arms.

Harry took in the sight before him and barked at the Granger's, "Get behind us, now!"

As the Granger's did as he ordered, Ron paled. "'Mione?" He asked in a trembling voice.

Grabbing his arm, Harry said, "Later Ron. Right now, we've got trouble coming!"

The fireplace flared again, growing to enormous proportions as five Death Eaters stepped out. Harry took two out with a spell cast from each hand. He wasn't taking any chances, so his spells were doing incredible damage to the Death Eaters.

Molly fired a stunner at one Death Eater, who dodged it.

Arthur cast a Reducto at another, hitting him square in the chest.

Ginny hit one with her improved bat bogey hex, and the man stumbled back. Dropping his wand, his hands rose to his face in horror as a turkey sized bat oozed out of each nostril and dripped down to his feet. Coughing, the man tried to reach for his wand, but the bogeys weren't done with him yet. Two more oozed out of his nose as the first two attacked.

The floo flared again and another five Death Eaters appeared. Harry started hurling spells at incredible speeds, dropping a man before he stepped out of the fireplace.

Arthur dodged an incoming Reducto curse, and the entire wall behind him exploded. Not even flinching, he dropped his opponent with a shouted, “Stupify!” Turning quickly, he fired off another curse, downing the man foolish enough to turn his backs on him.

Ron was hit with a bludgeoning spell that hurled him into the wall and knocked him out. Ginny took a minor hit from a cutting curse, before dropping her assailant.

Molly downed the last two Death Eaters. Hitting one man with the Incarcerous spell, she spun quickly and hit the last man with an Impediment jinx, stopping him in his tracks. She walked up to him, furious. Grabbing his wand, she doubled up her fist, hauled her arm back and hit him in the face. He fell, stiff as a board, and landed hard.

Ginny bound her bat bogey victim, and then kicked him.

Panting, Harry looked around. One wall of the Burrow was missing. The living room was a mass of bodies and the kitchen was on fire. As Molly rushed off to put it out, Arthur ran to the floo and called Dumbledore.

Ginny touched her bleeding arm gingerly and flinched. She moved over to Harry and wrapped her arms around him. Burying her face in his chest, she started to weep.

Ron sat, surrounded by a pile of cracked plaster, holding his arm tightly to his chest. He stared fixedly on Hermione’s still body as her parents kneeled beside her.

“Mione?” He gasped again, the anguish clearly heard in his voice. Molly hurried over and tried to make him look elsewhere, but he couldn’t turn away.

The floo flared again, causing everyone to whip his or her wand up. Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey stepped out. It continued to flare as other Order members arrived. Remus, Tonks, Moody, the room was filling up quickly! The Order members started moving the unconscious Death Eaters out of the Burrow to the Ministry. Ginny’s bat bogey victim was too busy gagging and ducking to protest.

Madam Pomfrey rushed over to Hermione and turned her over. She gasped as she saw the extent of the wound. She looked up at Dumbledore with an appeal in her eye. Dumbledore looked down at the still figure and shook his head as a tear ran down his cheek. Madam Pomfrey looked at Hermione’s parents.

Poppy then turned a pleading look to Tonks. “Tonks, Fawkes won’t help. If you know another phoenix... I can’t help her... she’s slipping away.”

Emma sobbed on Dan’s shoulder. Tonks looked anguished. Ginny looked up at Harry, the plea in her eye obvious. He smiled at her then released her.

“This is not meant to happen,” Harry said, walking to where Hermione lay. “It can’t be.”

Harry could feel his magic flaring up to new heights. He never even noticed as he transformed into Wings. One moment he was Harry, walking, and the next moment he was Wings, gliding to his friend and singing a song of comfort.

He landed next to Hermione and looked at her. His sister. Next to Ginny, the one woman he loved the most. She looked so pale, her breath so slow. Harry felt his love welling up within him and the idea of her loss caused him to weep over her. His tears flowed freely into the wound. A few tears, just one or two would have been enough, but he kept crying. His sister. It. Must. Not. Be!

Finally stepping back, Wings cocked his head and looked at the stunned crowd. There was a flash of light and Fawkes glided to a landing on Dumbledore's shoulder. Hermione coughed weakly and opened her eyes, her wound closed and healed. Emma swept her daughter into her arms, tears streaming down her face while Hermione sobbed weakly in her arms.

*"Well done Fledging! I had hoped you would realize what you must do,"* Fawkes said in his mind.

Wings scanned the crowd before turning to Fawkes. *"Why does the man glow with a tinge of black? He is the only one to do so."*

Fawkes answered sadly, *"His life journey comes to a close Fledging. Soon he will depart this plane."*

*"Is there nothing that can be done, Fawkes?"*

*"You can interfere, but do you want to bind yourself to this man?"*

*"I am already bound to him Fawkes. His offspring is my family and I have just shared myself with her."*

*"Very well, but you must wound him in order to heal him. But remember, when his time finally comes, you will regret his passing. It is the nature of our bond."*

The group of people watched as the two phoenixes seemed to be holding a conversation. Then Wings sprang aloft. He started flying in circles above Dan Granger.

Dumbledore looked interested and said, "Poppy, would you do a quick diagnostic of Doctor Granger?"

Madam Pomfrey ran a couple of quick checks, and then said, "How long have you been sick, Doctor Granger?"

Dan shrugged his shoulders saying, "A couple of months now. They say there isn't much they can do about it."

Hermione looked weakly up at her father and whispered "Daddy... no..."

Wings cried out furiously and dove for Dan's hand, talons extended. Dan stumbled back, jerking his bleeding hands away. Several people raised their wands.

Dumbledore thundered, "HOLD!"

Everyone froze.



“Doctor Granger, hold your hand out please,” the old wizard, continued with a smile.

Fawkes launched himself from Dumbledore’s shoulder and glided over to Dan, dropping a tear onto the wound. Wings followed immediately behind him dropping another tear. Then Wings went over to Ginny and dropped a healing tear onto her arm before settling on her other shoulder. Fawkes returned to Dumbledore.

Madam Pomfrey re-ran her scan on Dan, and then smiled at him. Stunned he stumbled over to his wife and daughter and who grabbed him.

Dumbledore looked at Wings and, with a merry smile, said “Harry, I think its time you return to your human form.”

Fawkes laughed at Albus and launched himself into the air. *“Well done Fledging, but don’t let Albus worry you. He’s always been a bit of a bore.”*

Wings left Ginny’s shoulder to glide with Fawkes.

*“Thank you for your help, Fawkes.”*

Fawkes vanished in a flash of flame as Harry returned to his normal form.

Madam Pomfrey looked at Harry and said in a wry voice. “I must say Mr. Potter, just when I think nothing you do can surprise me, you surprise me.”

Dumbledore stood there looking at Harry, his eyes twinkling and said, “I think, Harry, that you and I need to sit down one day soon for a long conversation. There is much about you that I’d like to learn.”

Harry nodded at that, and then turned to survey the damage. Molly and Madam Pomfrey were healing Ron’s bruised ribs. Ron still hadn’t taken his eyes off Hermione.

The Burrow was badly damaged. The kitchen was ruined, a whole wall was blasted out and other walls had door-sized holes in them from deflected spells.

Remus took in Harry’s expression and stepped over to him.

“Harry, you know you own Grimmauld Place. There is more than enough room for everyone. Let’s get everyone there for tonight and tomorrow we’ll send someone back for whatever you need.” When Harry didn’t reply, he took charge.

Remus looked over to Molly and Arthur. “Molly, Arthur, let’s get everyone over to Grimmauld for tonight. In the morning Arthur and I can come back and bring over what everyone needs and survey the damage in the light of day. It will be a little crowded, but we can fit everyone in.”

Molly and Arthur nodded and began to gather up their family.

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## Chapter 9 Tears, Potions, and Pranks.

### Grimmauld Place, the morning after the Battle at the Burrow...

Harry stumbled into the kitchen at Grimmauld place, his hand rubbing his forehead as his scar burned steadily. Harry hadn't gotten much sleep last night, but then no one had. The Burrow was pretty much wrecked; Hermione had nearly died. Ron had been so upset last night Madam Pomfrey had to give him a dreamless sleeping potion and the Granger's house had burned to the ground.

Harry was lucky; he wasn't sharing a room with someone else. Remus had gotten approval from Harry to redecorate Grimmauld Place and had attacked that chore with gusto. Remus and Tonks' room could have been best described as the Mistresses bedroom, and Harry's the Masters bedroom. Remus had decorated the Master bedroom in the Gryffindor colors of red and gold.

As he sat heavily in one of the kitchen chairs, Remus, Tonks and Molly eyed him.

Molly exclaimed, "Harry you look dreadful, why don't you go back to bed?"

"Can't Molly, my scar's hurting too much. I'd say Voldemort is probably very unhappy at the results of last night's little fracas."

"Would a pain relieving potion help Harry? Madam Pomfrey left us plenty."

"I wish they did help Molly, but no one has been able to figure how to stop it. Actually, this isn't as bad as it can get. It should stop soon. These things only last a few hours."

Molly bounced up and started to fix Harry something to eat. The three sat quietly for a while. When Dan and Emma entered the kitchen later, Molly asked how Hermione was doing.

Emma replied, "She's still sleeping. She's weak, but Doctor... er... Madam Pomfrey left us several medic... I mean potions for her to take." The two of them sat at the table, looking over at Harry, troubled.

Harry sighed and thought *I guess it's time for some explanations.*

Harry reached over to take one of Emma's hands in his.

"Mrs. Granger, I owe you two an explanation for what occurred last night. Hermione is very special to me. I think of her as the sister I never had. When Madam Pomfrey said there was nothing she could do to save Hermione, I had to take steps to save her life."

Remus interrupted. "Dan, Emma, I think what you need to understand is that Harry is what we call an Animagus. That means he has the ability to transform from a human form to an animal form. Harry's form is one of the rarest known. He can turn into a phoenix, a magical creature with some amazing abilities. One of the most prized abilities of a phoenix is the ability for its tears to heal. Phoenixes will not heal just anyone. They are extraordinarily picky about whom they will and will not heal. Harry's phoenix seems to have extra properties as well. He healed

your daughter out of the love he felt for her. And you, Dan, because of your daughter's love for you..."

Tonks broke in, fully intent on saying something that she knew would embarrass Harry, but it had to be said.

"Harry is like that. He doesn't want to see his family or friends in pain and will take steps to prevent it, even at risk to himself. I'd say he probably felt that your illness would have devastated Hermione and he wouldn't allow that to happen to her. You should feel honored, Dan. You had not one, but two phoenixes provide their tears for you. Two creatures of the light judged you last night, and both found you worthy."

Harry shot Tonks an embarrassed glare.

"What? I explained it didn't I? You were trying Harry, but not doing a very good job of it."

Harry retaliated with a, "Thanks Auntie Tonks", and then ducked a piece of toast she flung at him.

Harry finished his tea and toast and left the table. Ginny and Ron were asleep in sleeping bags on the floor in the living room. Harry lay down on the couch next to Ginny, and watched her for a while.

Back in the kitchen, Remus sighed as he watched Harry leave the room. Turning to Tonks he said, "I don't think it's hit him yet."

Tonks nodded glumly. Molly glanced at the two of them, an eyebrow raised. "What are you two talking about?"

Remus looked grim and replied, "Molly, Harry killed last night. I know he was defending you and the others, but once he realizes it, I think he's going to take it very hard. He needs to learn that there are times when killing is necessary, but it's a terrible lesson to learn for one so young. Don't worry Molly. Tonks and I will talk to him about it."

A few minutes later, Molly came out to find Arthur. Entering the living room she spotted Ron and Ginny asleep in their sleeping bag. Harry slept on the couch. She conjured a blanket and placed it over him.

Harry awoke to his nose was being tickled. Ginny was on the floor, leaning against the couch by his head, reading a book. Every so often she'd shake her head, causing some hair to tickle his nose. He liked the smell of her hair. It smelled of jasmine and lilies.

Moving his head a littler closer to her, he exhaled softly, sending a warm caress of air against her neck. When she trembled slightly, he whispered, "Are you doing that on purpose?"

Ginny let out a startled yelp and leapt to her feet. Harry started laughing. She whirled to face him, hands on her hips. "That wasn't funny, Mr. Potter!"

"Well, if you hadn't woke me up by tickling my nose with your hair, it wouldn't have happened. Why are you reading in here anyway? There are better rooms for reading in."

“Ron is being a bloody git to everyone today. He’s snapping at everyone over the smallest things, but mum told him if he woke you, she’d send him back to Hogwarts via owl! Mum said you had problems sleeping last night?”

Harry nodded, turning serious. “I think last night’s little happening upset Voldemort. My scar burned for a long time last night, keeping me from sleeping much. I got up, talked with your mum, Remus, Tonks and the Granger’s for a bit. Then I came in here to relax. I guess I fell asleep watching you sleep. By the way, is Hermione awake yet?”

“Not that I’ve heard. Madam Pomfrey gave her a pretty strong sleeping draught last night. Dad and the twins are home getting our stuff. I’m afraid we’re going to be here for a while.”

“Well, I may own this house, but it’s not home. How about we see what we can do to speed up moving back to the Burrow?”

Harry stood at that point and headed into the kitchen with Ginny following close behind. The five adults looked up when Harry and Ginny entered the kitchen. Molly lit up with a smile and offered to make them something to eat. Harry, who hadn’t really eaten much of a breakfast, was rather hungry by now so he quickly took a seat.

“Something to eat would be great! I feel much better now that I’ve gotten some sleep. My scar has stopped hurting too. Oh, and Ginny said that Arthur and the twins were getting our stuff from the Burrow?”

Molly nodded at that, still cooking breakfast. “Yes, they should be back in an hour or two. They’re packing up clothing and the like for us.”

Turning to Remus, Harry asked, “What are the chances we can get a contractor out there today to find out how long it will take to fix things? I don’t mind this place, but you and Tonks are newlyweds and don’t need us underfoot. Besides, I’d like to go home.”

Molly choked back a sob at the stove and said to Harry, “Dear, it’s going to take us a long time to fix things enough to be able to move back in.”

“Molly this is one of those ‘family helps family’ times we spoke about. I love visiting with Remus and Auntie Tonks...” Tonks glared at Harry while he smirked back at her, before continuing “...but this isn’t home to me, or Ginny or Ron or you and Arthur. Maybe we won’t be able to get things fixed before we have to go back to school. But they will be fixed as soon as possible...” His tone softened “... think of it this way Molly. You get to totally redesign your kitchen, maybe even the living room, depending on what the contractor says.”

Molly smiled a little wistfully at that idea.

“Molly, Harry’s right...” Remus agreed. “Even if Harry hadn’t asked me to do this, I’d have done it anyway. In fact, I think we’ll also bring in a Wizard Security firm and make sure the house is fully warded and fireproofed. It’s not charity Molly, it’s family helping family.”

Remus turned to Emma and Dan. “I realize that you have a way of rebuilding your home, but once it’s built, we’re going to ward your place as well. Like it or not, you folks now belong to

clan Potter-Weasley-Lupin, and we take care of our own. In the meantime, and I think Harry will agree with me, you and your daughter are welcome to stay here.”

Harry looked up from shoveling a forkful of eggs into his mouth and nodded vigorously.

Upstairs in one of the guest bedrooms, Hermione opened her eyes slowly and blinked the sleepiness from them. She was in a strange bed in a room she didn't recognize.

*Where am I? She thought. And why am I here?*

It took a moment for her grogginess to clear and then the events of the previous night came crashing down on her. Her Parents! Death Eaters! Her home burning!

She choked back a sob, trying to muffle the sound with her pillow.

The door opened partway and a figure entered the dim room.

“Mione?” said a voice.

Hermione looked towards the door, angrily dashing the tears from her eyes, her vision blurry from crying. With her vision clearing, she saw Ron standing at the bedside with tears in his eyes. He raised one hand as if to touch her, and then dropped it back like he was afraid to.

Hermione peered up at him. Ron crying? She could see Ron was more than upset about something. She knew goofy Ron, and angry Ron, but she didn't know this Ron. She sat up and looked at him more carefully.

“Ron? Sit on the bed and tell me what's gone wrong now...”

Ron started to sit down, and then lunged for her, wrapping her in a hug, holding her tight and crying against her shoulder. Hermione opened her eyes in surprise as she held him tightly.

“Shhh... it's going to be ok Ron.”

Eventually he stopped and pulled away from her, looking down at the blankets. He wouldn't meet her eyes.

“Mione I nearly lost you last night... when I saw how badly you were hurt...” Ron choked on a shuddering sob before continuing. “... I felt like a part of me had died Mione... I don't think I could stand to live like that... I never understood what Ginny and Harry have... but I think I do now...” He gave into another shuddering sob.

Hermione sat there, stunned. He looked up at her, his face streaked with tears. His eyes begged her to say something, anything. He reached out and caressed her cheek with the back of his hand before continuing, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Mione I've not done right for you... I'm sorry... I'll do better... I just don't want to lose you...” his voice dropped to a whisper. “I love you Mione.”

Hermione's mind whirled in a million directions. He loved her? Ron loves me? RON LOVES ME?

She reached out with a trembling hand and wiped a tear from Ron's face. He closed his eyes and leaned into her touch. Hermione's lip trembled and she grabbed him, holding him tight. The two of them shed new tears, but not tears of pain this time.

Down in the kitchen Harry paused while eating his breakfast and broke into a huge grin. He leaned into Ginny and whispered in her ear. Her eyes grew wide and she giggled.

Looking over at Emma and Dan he said, "Hermione is awake, but I'd give her a little while before you go up to her. She's with Ron at the moment and while I don't know what he's saying to her, I can tell she's really happy about it. Probably something to do with a conversation he and I had just after Christmas."

Emma looked at him strangely then asked, "You can read her thoughts?"

"No, not really Mrs. Granger. Since I healed her yesterday, I've been able to feel her emotions, but it should fade away. I imagine by tomorrow I won't be able to do it. It's just a temporary effect. I can feel Ginny here, and even your husband..." he said pointing at Dan, "... mainly he's worried, there's a little touch of fear and even awe. I'm not too sure, but I hope that the fear and awe isn't directed at me."

Emma touched Dan's hand. "We haven't thanked you for what you did yesterday, for Hermione and for Dan... You saved Hermione's life and my husbands..."

"It's alright Mrs. Granger, Mr. Granger. Hermione is like a sister to me and I couldn't let her die. The same goes for you Mr. Granger. I couldn't let you die either. I think you two must be pretty special to raise the smartest witch ever. And I wouldn't mind getting to know my sister's family," he added, shyly.

"Well said Harry, well said!" a voice said from the doorway.

Turning, Harry saw Dumbledore walk in, followed by Professor McGonagall and both Professors Snape.

Molly jumped up from her chair. "Professors, can I get anyone anything?"

"Just some tea perhaps Molly."

"Harry, I wanted to thank you for your kind Christmas gift. It was one of the best presents I have ever received," said Dumbledore, with a twinkle in his eye.

Harry chuckled at that. He had remembered something Dumbledore told him back in his first year, so this year he got the Headmaster exactly what he said he wanted.

Remus turned to eye Harry suspiciously. "Harry..." he said in a stern tone, "... just what did you give the Professor?"

Harry smirked at Remus before replying. "Oh, back in my first year at Hogwarts the Headmaster complained that people bought him books all the time and he'd really wished that, just once, someone would give him woolen socks. So I did. Two dozen woolen socks"

Dumbledore broke in, "Yes I do so enjoy them Remus. My feet haven't been this warm in ages." Then turning serious again he asked, "I take it that Miss Granger is well this morning?"

Emma spoke up. "Harry here says she's awake and talking to Ron at the moment. We were about to go up and check on her." She grabbed her husband's hand and stood up. The pair left the room.

Professor McGonagall looked at Harry sternly. "Mr. Potter, the Headmaster here tells me you exhibited a bit of an animagus talent last night, but he won't tell me what form you have. More of this muggle security business I take it?"

"Professor, if I underwent the Revealus Animagus potion test in your class, you would have sent in an application for me to obtain an Animagus permit, would you not?"

"It is the law, Mr. Potter."

"And aren't those applications a matter of public record, Professor? Records that anyone can look up?"

Professor McGonagall harrumphed loudly. "Oh very well Mr. Potter, I see your point. But I must insist I see this for myself. I need to make sure you're doing this right."

Harry grinned; he knew what was going on. Dumbledore was setting McGonagall up for a surprise. Remus had a big grin on his face; he was going to enjoy seeing this. Molly watched with interest.

"Professors? You might want to take a seat. People tend to need to sit after I transform."

Professor McGonagall sat down and stared at him primly. Severus sat also; he had come to learn that Harry was full of surprises.

"Professor, don't touch your tea just yet. I wouldn't want you to burn yourself when you drop the cup." Then Harry stood up and transformed into Wings.

McGonagall's arms flopped loosely at her sides as she rocked back in shock. Severus just stared. Serena smiled at the phoenix.

Wings sprang aloft, circling around the room a few times. Landing briefly on Molly's shoulder, he nudged her head affectionately with his own. Springing aloft again, he circled the room then vanished in a flash of flame.

He appeared a moment later in Hermione's room. Ron and Hermione were talking to her parents. Wings sang a song of joy and flew around the room a few times before vanishing again.

A moment later he reappeared in the kitchen, glided over to his seat and transformed back into his human form. Taking his seat, he grinned at the Professors.

McGonagall sat back in her chair staring at him. Harry leaned towards her and said with a wry grin, "Did I do it right, Professor?"

She just sat there, shaking her head.

"Mr. Potter, when you do things, you rarely do them wrong."

Molly gazed at the serious looks exchanged among the Professors and Harry. People often overlooked just how smart she really was.

"Ginny, do be a dear and run up to Hermione's room. Find out if I can make her something to eat please?"

Ginny nodded at her mother and left the room. Harry shot Molly a look of gratitude before turning serious.

"Professor, I give you my wizards oath that I will register my form with the ministry once this is all done..." His tone dropped to just above a whisper. "... If I'm still around to do it."

Remus and Molly looked at Harry, their eyes wide.

Dumbledore looked at him closely, his eyes intent, but he said to Harry in a gentle voice, "Harry you know something don't you? You've seen something?"

Harry slumped his shoulders and sighed. "Yes Professor, I have. I was planning on sharing it with you when we returned to Hogwarts. I wanted to first review it again in that Pensieve you gave me for Christmas. Would it be possible for us to wait until after the holiday to discuss this? I might have a better idea of what's happening then. All I can say is that one way or another, this will all be over by the time I graduate. Or by the time I'm supposed to graduate."

Dumbledore nodded while the rest of the professors exchanged worried looks. Molly turned to Harry.

"Harry, of course you're going to graduate. You have excellent grades..."

Her voice trailed off. She could see the doubt in Harry's eyes. Her lip trembled and her eyes misted over. "But... you... Ginny..."

Harry couldn't speak. He shot Dumbledore a pleading look.

"Molly, the love Harry and Ginny share is exactly what Harry needs. It gives him the strength and the will to fight because of what she represents to him. Harry may be the one to save our world, but your daughter is the key to it all. In a way, she's probably the most important witch of our age. We have some unpleasant times ahead, but I am much more confident these days than I once was. I think Harry's going to win his fight, even if he still has doubts."

Molly grabbed Harry in a fierce hug and told him, "You're going to beat that monster Harry, and then you and Ginny are going to give me a bunch of grandchildren to spoil."



She dabbed her eyes on her apron, then asked if the Professors would like to join them for dinner. Severus started to frown until Serena elbowed him in the ribs.

“I think that’s an excellent idea Molly. Your cooking is the marvel of all of England.”  
Dumbledore said with a twinkle. Harry excused himself, saying he’d like to see Hermione, now that she was awake.

Walking into the bedroom, he saw Ginny and Ron sitting on the bed with Hermione, and her parents in armchairs near the fireplace. Emma looked very pleased by Ron’s behavior with Hermione.

Harry stood at the end of the bed watching the other two in amusement. Ginny was grinning up at Harry and Hermione and Ron were spending an inordinate amount of time just staring at each other, oblivious to the rest of the room. Harry coughed.

Hermione glanced up to see Harry and bolted out of the bed, grabbing him.

“‘Mione... air... can’t... breath...!” She released him, but not before kissing his cheek and whispering a “Thank you” in his ear.

“Dinner should be ready in about an hour or so Hermione, so you might want to think about getting into something presentable. I heard Arthur and the twins come back with our clothes, so Ginny can probably loan you something to wear.”

Turning to Dan and Emma he said, “That reminds me Mrs. Granger, Mr. Granger. If you don’t mind Molly taking a few measurements, we’ll be able to pick up some clothing for you as well.”

Dan and Emma were wearing some clothing borrowed from Remus and Tonks.

“We’ll get you enough clothes so you’ll be able to go out comfortably, and I’ll give you some money so you’ll be able to buy clothes for yourself and Hermione.” He held up his hand at their protests.

“I realize that your insurance will cover most of this, but that’s going to take time. Hermione and you two need to have more than what you’re wearing now and she’ll need a complete set of replacements for all of her Hogwarts uniforms and books.”

Hermione suddenly looked horrified at the thought of her lost books. Harry caught the look and smirked. “Don’t worry ‘Mione. Just think about how much fun you’ll have replacing them. Now if you’ll all excuse me, since my trunk is here, I think I’ll go change for dinner myself.”

Harry left the room with a grin after winking at Ginny.

Emma was shocked. Dan finally coughed and said, “Is he always so commanding?”

Ron snorted and everyone turned to look at him. He looked thoughtful for a moment before speaking. “Harry isn’t normally very commanding at all. It took my mum to make me see what’s happening to him. He lost his parents when he was a baby. Then he was sent to live with people that hated and abused him. Now, he’s living with us, and he’s reaching out to everyone he loves

and pulling them into his family. He doesn't have any real family left, so he's decided to build one for himself.

According to mum, he's one of the richest wizards in the country, but he doesn't really care about the money. To him, it's just a way of making life a little easier for those he cares about. I didn't understand that until a few days ago. I always hated being poor, but Harry grew up poor, unloved and beaten by those who were supposed to love him. In a way Harry's reaching out to find what I've always had and took for granted..."

His voice trailed off while Hermione and Ginny both stared at him in shock. Ron said this? Both Ginny and Hermione grabbed Ron in a hug while Dan and Emma looked thoughtful.

Tonks stepped into the room holding an orange ball of fluff. Hermione took one look and screamed, "Crookshanks!"

The cat bolted for Hermione, looking slightly seared. He'd lost some of the fur from his tail, but was otherwise fine. Although, he did look rather put out about it all.

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### **Elsewhere in England, location unknown...**

Voldemort sat in his chamber, angry and displeased.

*SNAPE! How did he do that? Voldemort now carried a Dark Mark that caused **him** pain every time he summoned his servants! HOW DARE SNAPE, A MERE POTION BREWER, DO THAT TO HIM!*

"Summon Wormtail," he hissed, causing one masked figure to scurry from the chamber.

Wormtail rushed in and groveled at the feet of Voldemort.

"Wormtail, what news do you have for me?"

"My Lord... I... I..."

"What? Speak, you sniveling cur!"

"My Lord... I regret to tell you, but our Ministry contacts inform me that the death squad sent to kill the mudblood is now in Ministry hands. Several were killed, and the remainder have been tried already and sentenced to the veil. The mudblood and her family live my lord, but no one knows where they are now..."

Voldemort pounded his fist against the chair and looked at the groveling fat man.

"Your reward Wormtail... CRUCIO!"

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### **Back in Grimmauld Place...**

As everyone sat down for dinner, Molly looked up from her cooking and frowned. "Ginny, see if you can find Harry. He doesn't want to be late for dinner."

Ginny left the table in search of Harry. After a few minutes she returned to the kitchen, looking pale and worried.

"Ginny, what is it? Where's Harry?" Molly asked in concern.

"He's... he's in the library... he said he's not hungry, he's not feeling well." She choked back a sob before continuing, "His scar is hurting again."

Everyone around the table except for Dan and Emma exchanged worried looks. Serena got up and laid a hand on Ginny's shoulder saying, "Take me to him Ginny."

Everyone followed them to the library. Harry lay curled up in a tight ball on a small couch, the heel of one palm pressed tightly to his scar. His body was covered in a cold sweat, his face ashen, and every limb was trembling. A small trickle of blood leaked from under his hand.

Serena, spotting Harry on the couch, rushed over to kneel by his side. Harry whimpered. She grabbed his free hand and felt his pulse. Harry's heart beat like a jackhammer. It was way too fast!

"Severus, return to Hogwarts and bring back a dreamless sleep potion, but before you do, add a touch of ground heartwood and some asphodel. His heart rate is too high. We need to bring it down until this attack passes. And bring me a sampling kit!"

Severus nodded and left the room.

Molly stood by the door looking absolutely stricken. She knew Harry's scar sometime hurt him, but nothing like this!

Ginny stood nearby watching, her arms wrapped around her brother. Ron held his sister tight, knowing she needed the comfort right now. He knew he'd need it if Hermione were in that kind of pain and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Hermione clutched at her mother.

Serena brushed back the hair on Harry's forehead and tried to soothe him. Softly, she said to him, "Help is coming Harry... Severus went to get something to make you sleep. Soon the pain will be gone, just hold on a while longer."

*The amount of pain he's in! Merlin how can he take it and not go mad? She thought. Why are such innocents made to suffer like this? This can't be allowed to continue. I know Severus and the others have looked into this, but I owe it to him to try again.*

Severus returned with the potion and a sampling kit. Serena deftly placed one empty vial to his arm and cast a spell extracting some of Harry's blood. She took a second sample directly from the blood coming from his scar.

Placing the samples safely back in the sample kit, she took the dreamless sleep potion and gently lifted Harry's head. "Harry, drink this. It will help you," She said soothingly.

She had to repeat herself several times, but eventually Harry seemed to grasp what she was saying and allowed her give him the potion. Serena watched him closely for a while. Finally, as the tension seemed to bleed away from his body, she relaxed. Checking his pulse, she found it beating normally once more. He was still dreadfully pale, however. The attack was still happening, but the potion had sent him to a place where he could no longer feel it.

Molly conjured up a bandage to wrap around his forehead, then transfigured the couch into a bed. By silent agreement, it was decided not to move him up to his bedroom.

A subdued crowd returned to the kitchen. Ginny had wanted to stay with him, but Molly told her she needed to eat to keep up her own strength for Harry's sake.

Everyone sat around the table eating silently when Dan finally broke in. "I don't know much about Magic, but can someone please explain what just happened in there?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily before speaking. "Mr. Granger, what you just witnessed was Harry undergoing an attack by Voldemort. I don't know how much Hermione has told you, but I'm sure even you have guessed by now that our world is at war. On one side, you have Voldemort, an evil wizard with very strong abilities, whose goal is to turn the world to his own twisted vision. In it, muggles would be enslaved or killed outright. On the other side, we have those of us who are fighting to prevent that from happening.

Harry plays a crucial role in that war. He shares a special connection with Voldemort by way of that scar on his forehead, which he received on the night his parents were murdered. Last year, Voldemort used that connection to trick Harry, leading him into a trap. Harry and his friends, including your daughter, managed to escape. But Harry's Godfather was killed. He has since learned to block those visions, though I daresay the guilt he still feels over the loss of his Godfather is quite intense. Despite his ability to block Voldemort from his mind, he cannot block the pain Voldemort is capable of causing him. Many of us have tried to find ways to stop his pain, but alas, none of us have succeeded... This is a heavy burden for a young wizard to bear, and he already has so many other burdens..."

Emma broke in at this point. "So you're saying this Voldemort person is why our home was attacked? What can we do? Should we flee the country?"

Dumbledore raised his hand. "Mrs. Granger, there is no place you could flee to and be truly safe. If Voldemort wins, no place will be safe. You are in danger because of who you are, and what your daughter is. Voldemort despises muggles, and muggle born alike. Hermione here, as well as Ron and Ginny, have their own parts to play in this war, without which our cause would be lost. Exactly what part they have to play, I cannot say. I do know that all of them give Harry strength. Harry, whether he knows it or not, will be the one to lead this fight. Some of us will fight by his side; others will fight just by returning the love he's given so freely.

I do not know what Hermione's role will be, but you can ask any Professor here and they will tell you that Hermione is one of the smartest witches we have ever encountered..."

Hermione looked embarrassed at this but Dumbledore continued. “All I can say is that we all have our roles to play. Remus has spoken to me about his plans to see your new home warded properly. After it’s complete, I intend to come to your home myself and see if I can’t improve on those wards. We intend to have someone watching your house at all times, and I’ll arrange to give each of you a portkey which you can use in times of emergency. There is much we can do to ensure your safety and Hermione’s as well.”

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### **Hogwarts, The Snape’s private quarters...**

The next day, Serena Snape sent Dumbledore a message stating, short of Voldemort attacking the castle, she was not to be disturbed. The students were away for the holiday and she’d finally caught up on her paperwork. She intended to concentrate the rest of her vacation, if needed, on her own project.

Seeing the pain Harry’s scar caused him had been a real slap in the face to her. Harry had labored for weeks to find a way of removing the Dark Mark from her husband’s arm, yet no one seemed interested any more in finding a solution to Harry’s pain. Everyone accepted it as something the young man had to live with. Well, she wasn’t one of them! If the boy could save her husband, she’d be damned if she’d let him suffer any longer!

Entering her private quarters, she charmed the door to recognize Severus, before locking it against all others. Stripping off her robe as she walked into the library, she made mental notes on which books she would need.

Four hours later, Severus entered the apartment. He took a moment to admire his wife’s charm work before walking down the hallway and into the living room. Finding it empty, he paused for a moment in puzzlement, before heading for the library. Dumbledore had told him of Serena’s strange request at dinner. He assumed that was why she hadn’t show up in the Great Hall for the meal.

Stepping into the library, he smiled in amusement at the sight before him. His wife was seated behind the desk, surrounded by parchment and books. Serena had both hands buried in the hair at her temple, a quill stuck behind one ear, and two different books opened before her. As he watched, she scratched her nose, leaving behind a smear of ink.

Suddenly, she grabbed the quill behind her ear, dipped it into an inkwell and...paused. The quill nib dropped to the parchment in front of her a few times, but never wrote a word. With a growl, she threw the quill down and shoved the two books away from her.

“Problem?”

Serena jumped and looked up. Glaring at her husband, she stood and stretched. “I’ve been reading and taking notes so long without a break that nothing makes sense any more!”

“Have you eaten?” Severus asked quietly.

Sighing, she gave him a sheepish look. “No, actually. After I finished grading papers and putting the potions classroom to rights for the next term, I was in such a hurry to get started that I just forgot.”

Holding out a hand, he waited for her to take it, then pulled her close. “Why don’t we get you something to eat? Then you can tell me what you’re working on.”

Wrapping her arms around him, she sighed again. “It seems like it should be so easy, Severus. I practically brewed it in my mind while cleaning the dungeon...”

Severus groaned. “Serena, you’re a brilliant Potion Mistress, but you can be a bit obsessive sometimes. There are times when you simply have to admit that not everything can be done with potions or salves.”

“Have you ever seen me give up on something once I set my mind to it?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean...”

“Severus, you don’t even know what I’m trying to do! Do not tell me it can’t be done until you make an *informed* decision on the matter!” Serena shoved him away in annoyance and headed back towards the desk.

He caught her from behind, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back against him. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Serena. Come, eat something and tell me what you’re up too.”

“Well, it’s a salve for Harry’s scar...”

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## LATER...

Serena stood over the cauldron, glaring at the contents. Why hadn’t it boiled down and condensed? Rubbing tired eyes, she picked up the parchment containing the instructions for her brew and thought it over once again.

*Wait, there it is! I put the ground nettles in too early...and the powdered leaches in too late! Oh, for Merlin’s sake. No wonder it didn’t boil down correctly. I forgot to add a thickening agent!*

Disgusted with herself, she made a note of her mistakes on the parchment before rolling it up. Eyeing the cauldron, she tapped the parchment against her lips, shrugged and cast a holding charm on it before extinguishing the fire below.

Walking over to her desk, she dropped the parchment into her ‘current’ workbasket. Propping a hip against the edge of the desk, she rubbed at her tired neck muscles and glanced out the window.

The sun was coming up. No wonder she was making so many mistakes. *I haven’t stayed up all night since I studied for my Mastery*, she thought.

Her reverie was interrupted by a slight snore coming from the couch. Looking over, she smiled tiredly at the sight. Her husband was stretched out, buried under parchments and books, one hand thrown over his head, still clutching a quill.

Pushing away from her desk, she walked over and uncovered him. Bending down, she kissed him awake gently.

“Wha...Serena?” He asked, roughly.

“Come on love. If you sleep on the couch too long, you’ll have a sore neck. Let’s go to bed.”

After helping him up, Serena lead her sleepy husband out of the lab.

Too few hours later, by Serena’s reckoning anyway, Severus was shaking her awake. Grumpily, she tried to turn away from him, but he wouldn’t allow it.

“Serena, wake up.”

Refusing to open her eyes, she ignored him.

“Serena?”

*Well, that’s not working. Time for a change in plan,* she thought.

With her eyes still closed, she reached up, grabbed his arms and pulled. If she could just get him back into bed, he would cuddle with her and she could go back to sleep. As he pulled the blankets away from her body and leaned down to gently wrap his arms around her, she thought, *it works every time!*

However, instead of joining her, he tightened his hold and hauled her bodily from the bed. Chuckling, he held her close as she leaned against him and cursed.

“Some of us didn’t get a nap on the couch last night, you know!”

“I wasn’t asleep that long,” he protested, mildly.

At her rude noise, he gave her a squeeze, kissed the top of her head, and then released her. Walking out, he called over his shoulder, “I’ll have breakfast on the table when you’re ready.”

Muttering evil comments at his retreating back, she headed into the bathroom. Merlin, she hated waking up!

Thirty minutes and two cups of strong tea later, she felt nearly human. Finishing her eggs and toast, she looked up as Severus entered the dining room, parchment in hand. Sitting down next to her, he held the rolled paper up for her to see.

“Do you know what this is?” He asked.

“Yes, parchment.” She replied, impudently.

Rolling his eyes, he flattened the roll on the table. Leaning over to look, she frowned.

“That’s the scroll with the potion ingredients and instructions I was using last night. As I’m sure you know by now, it didn’t work.”

“Perhaps,” he said, noncommittally. “Have you read through it?”

“Last night, just before I woke you. You can see I noted my mistakes in the margins.”

He grunted.

“It doesn’t work, Severus.”

“Umm.”

“You might as well throw it out. I need to start over.”

He grunted once again.

As he continued to examine parchment carefully, Serena became annoyed. Reaching over, she plucked the paper from the tabletop. He snatched it right back.

“Severus!”

“What? I’m not done reading it.”

“It’s garbage! What’s to read?”

Sighing, he turned towards her. “You said you read it?”

“Yes, last night. I was tired and upset. I’m beginning to think I need to find another way to approach this.”

“Read it again Serena, now that you’re awake,” he said, holding the parchment out to her.

Thinking to humor him, she took it. Scanning it once, she frowned. Starting over, she read through it more slowly.

Pushing back her chair and standing, she left the dining room. Entering the lab with Severus close behind her, she walked over to the cauldron. Looking down, she noted the bright, violet color. Removing the holding charm, she leaned over and inhaled cautiously. Nothing.

Casting the holding charm once again, she turned to face Severus. “You don’t really think...?” She stopped and cocked her head at him.

“I don’t know. If the parchment’s correct, maybe.”

“But the only way we’ll know is to test it. And we can’t. It’s against the law, Severus.”

“You’re jumping ahead of yourself a bit, don’t you think? We need to test for adverse reactions first.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, we’ll check. But you know as well as I do that, barring any reactions, there’s only one real way to test it. And it’s illegal!”



She stalked over to a cupboard and pulled down a small bottle. From a drawer, she removed a ladle.

Walking back to the caldron, she removed the charm, dipped the ladle into the liquid and poured a small amount into the bottle. Placing the ladle on the table, she replaced the charm and turned to face her husband.

“Serena, I think I should...”

“It’s my creation, Severus. Therefore it’s my duty.” With that, she downed the contents of the bottle and walked to her desk.

Sitting down, she put the bottle away, pulled a few pieces of parchment towards her and picked up her quill. Dipping it in ink, she glanced at the clock and started making notes.

*10:12am*

*No taste*

*Slight tingle in the back of the throat at ingestion*

*Breathing normal*

*Heart rate normal*

*No skin reaction*

Severus joined her at the desk. Taking her left hand in his, he watched her carefully, concern plain on his face. They waited. At intervals, Serena made more notes.

*10:22am*

*No physiological changes*

Serena fidgeted. Severus tightened his grip on her hand and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“You’re staring at me. You know I hate it when you do that!”

He smirked. “That’s not what you said two nights ago.”

“Would you behave yourself? This is an experiment, if you’ll remember!” She said, laughing at him.

They waited.

*10:32am*

*No physiological changes*

In all, they waited an hour. When no reactions were noted, Serena shrugged.

“Okay, so we’ve proven that the potion’s safe. We still haven’t proven that it *does anything* though.”

“True. So now we talk to Dumbledore,” Severus replied.

## **Hogwarts Infirmary, Four days later...**

Poppy Pomfrey had arranged the infirmary for the test. Her supplies were ready and, if she disagreed with what was about to happen, she was smart enough to keep her thoughts to herself. The Headmaster stood by a window, talking to Kingsley Shacklebolt and Minerva McGonagall.

As Severus and Serena entered, Dumbledore turned to face them. The merry twinkle was missing from his eyes, and his expression was grave. Severus' lips tightened. This had to be done, and Dumbledore knew it.

"Ah, Severus, Serena. Before we start, you should know that Minerva is here to take notes on the test and Mr. Shacklebolt is here as an observer for the Ministry. Amelia Bones, the head of the MLE, has approved the test, with the stipulation that I be the only person casting, and Severus the only recipient. If these terms are not acceptable to either of you, the testing will not be allowed."

"The terms are most generous, Headmaster," Severus replied. Reaching into his robe, he pulled out a small bottle and uncorked it. As Serena reached for his other hand, he turned to her. "Don't worry," he whispered, before tipping the bottle up and drinking the contents.

Giving the empty bottle to Poppy, he turned back to the Headmaster. "I'll need a few moments, Sir. I want to give the potion five minutes before we start."

Dumbledore nodded and McGonagall made a note of the delay.

Serena wrapped her arms around her husband. She hated this. She knew it was necessary, but she should be the one doing this test. Severus had suffered enough through the years, and if this potion didn't work...She didn't want to think about it.

Severus had refused to allow her to take the test. He went so far as to threaten to throw the whole cauldron out, consequences be damned. So now she found herself his arms, frightened for him, and knowing there wasn't anything she could do to stop it.

Severus bent and kissed her gently on the lips. He then pushed her to Poppy, turned to the Headmaster and said, "Whenever you're ready, Sir."

Dumbledore looked at Shacklebolt and received his nod of readiness. Turning to McGonagall and noting her disapproving look, he raised an eyebrow. Sighing, she picked up her quill and nodded.

Facing Severus once more, he gazed into the younger man's eyes, looking for...he didn't know. With a heavy heart, he pulled out his wand.

"Crucio!"

An hour later, Severus sat on one of the infirmary beds, breathing deeply. Serena knelt before him, concerned. He smiled at her tiredly and brushed a lock of hair off her cheek. "I'm fine, Serena. Really. I'm just a little sore. Poppy's potions have eased most of the pain."

Laying her head on his knee, she closed her eyes and shuddered.

The Cruciatus curse had been cast a total of three times, once every ten minutes. When the first two had hit, Severus felt nothing. When Dumbledore cast the third curse, thirty minutes into the test, it brought Severus to his knees. While the potion had done its job, the effects seemed to be time limited.

The draw back was, once the thirty minutes were up, the after effects of the Cruciatus came crashing down on the victim. While it was undoubtedly a breakthrough, and a huge advantage for their side, it wasn't a perfect answer.

Minerva had taken methodical notes of the test. Once it was over, she copied the parchment, and gave one to Shacklebolt for the MLE.

After speaking quietly with Dumbledore, Shacklebolt thanked Severus and Serena for their hard work. Retrieving the potion samples and brewing instructions Poppy had set aside for the Ministry, he left to inform Amelia Bones of the results. Poppy and McGonagall conferred for a moment about the results before both women left the room.

Dumbledore, looking older than ever, sat heavily in the chair at the foot of Severus' bed. "Forgive me, Severus. I know it needed to be done, but I never wanted to cause you pain."

"There's nothing to forgive, Headmaster. It was necessary, and you are the only one I trust to cast that spell."

"Poppy insists that you stay the night..."

"I'll be returning to my own quarters, Sir."

"I really don't think..."

"He'll stay, Headmaster," Serena said firmly, glowering at her husband, who scowled down at her. "You won the last argument Severus. It's my turn this time. You're going to..."

"Serena..."

"You're staying!" She growled. "If I have to, I'll tie you to that bed and sit on you, Severus. You're not leaving the infirmary until tomorrow morning!"

Giving up, he turned to lie on the bed. Crossing his arms over his chest, he glared at her. "Fine!" He said, petulantly.

As Serena stood to escort the smiling Headmaster to the door, she started muttering under her breath.

"...stubborn as a jackass, that one....childish and spoiled..."

Once her back was turned, Severus winked at Dumbledore and grinned. Damn, he loved it when she got angry!

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### **Snape Quarters, later that evening...**

After leaving Severus in Poppy's capable hands, Serena returned to their quarters. The potion had been a mistake. Oh, it had worked well enough, but the results had not been what she was aiming for.

Entering the lab, she crossed to her desk and sat down. From a drawer, she removed the blood samples she had taken from Harry and placed them on the desktop. Collecting parchment, quills and ink, she set to work.

With a few flicks of her wand, she cast magnifying spells on each sample. *There's a slight color difference. Odd, that shouldn't be.*

Casting the spell again, she increased the magnification on the samples to examine them at the cellular level. *Interesting. The sample from his arm looks normal. But the blood from the scar has a much thicker cell membrane...why?*

Pulling parchment to her, she grabbed a quill and jotted down her observations. Sitting back, she pinched the bridge of her nose before scowling at the samples magnified before her. *Why the difference, she asked herself. Come on woman. Think!*

Standing, she walked to a bookcase and scanned the volumes. Finding what she was looking for, she grabbed the book and returned to her desk. Placing a hand on the cover, she closed her eyes.

*It's thought of as a primitive form of magic, she thought. But it's worked for him before. Merlin knows the wizarding world is full of pretentious gits who'd rather sneer at the thought than examine the facts behind it...*

Breaking off her thoughts, she opened the book and set to work.

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### **The Pensieve...**

Things were going well. Molly was in seventh heaven. Harry had instructed the contractor to rebuild the kitchen and the living room to her specifications. Molly was spending half her days at Grimmauld and half at the Burrow, watching the construction. The Burrow wouldn't be fully repaired and ready for people to move back in until after the children returned to Hogwarts, but it would be repaired much sooner than she had expected.

Molly, Ginny and Hermione put their heads together over the kitchen design. Harry wasn't sure, but he knew she was making the kitchen much bigger than it had been. He suspected Molly was planning on a large kitchen to feed many grandchildren and that was a thought that made him sort of queasy.

Since there were few people around today, Harry felt it was a good idea to try out the Pensieve. After reading the small instruction booklet, he set the Pensieve down on the table in his sitting room. According to the instructions, the wand acted like a magnet, withdrawing a copy of the memory for placement into the Pensieve. The booklet went on to describe how the memory could

be played back or frozen to a specific point. It described how he could walk around a memory, view it from different angles, different perspectives, which was exactly what he wanted to do.

Harry extracted the memory he wanted and placed it in the Pensieve. Then, activating the Pensieve wandlessly, he felt his awareness shift radically.

*"...Flying above the town of Hogsmeade. Looking down he saw that many of the buildings were burning; a few had even collapsed upon themselves. Bodies littered the street..."*

Harry froze the memory at that point. Despite having an aerial vantage point, he could feel himself rushing down to the ground. He landed softly, without any pain. He stood in front of Gladrag's; the building had collapsed and was on fire. Next door, Zonko's was also burning. Many of the buildings looked damaged.

Moving down the street towards the train station, he spotted bodies. Some looked to be alive still, others were clearly dead. A lot of the faces he didn't recognize. Here and there he spotted an Order member. Mundungus looked to be dead or dying, and...TONKS!

She was sitting against a collapsed wall of Honeydukes. Her eyes were closed and there was a bleeding cut on her forehead. He breathed a sigh of relief. He was pretty sure she was just unconscious, not dead.

Looking up, he spotted something that he'd been desperately searching for. It was a sign in an unbroken pane of glass in Honeydukes. The sign read, "ON SALE NOW! FROM MAY 15th TO THE END OF THE MONTH, CHOCOLATE FROGS HALF OFF!"

*So that puts the attack somewhere between May 15th and May 31st. Maybe I can narrow that down a bit more,* he thought.

Harry continued his search and was appalled by the casualties. Women, children, no one was spared. At one point he thought he might have found a better date when he spotted the scorched front page of the Daily Prophet on the ground. But that issue was dated in April, weeks old. Finally he gave up looking and exited the memory.

*It's useful information. It gives me a time frame anyway. I wish I could have pinned it down further though,* he thought.

Harry looked over the Pensieve's booklet again and spotted a section on recovering forgotten memories. He wondered if it might be possible to recover any memory from his first year. Now that idea excited him. Maybe he could see his mum and dad?

His locket gave a sudden warning thump against his chest and he paused for a moment. Surely his parents wouldn't mind him seeing them? With that, Harry pulled out his wand and carefully extracted a memory and placed it into the Pensieve.

Entering the memory, he was shocked. Feeling suddenly numb and lost, he tried to break from the vision but he couldn't. All he could do is stand there mutely, helpless, and watch the scene unfold.

*Harry looked to be eight year old. He slept on a crib mattress that was too short for his frame. The cupboard was dark; the only light came from a crack under the door. Suddenly, the cupboard flooded with light. Aunt Petunia reached in with one hand and jerked Harry off his bed.*

*“Get up you freak! Get up and start making breakfast before your Uncle wakes up!” She bellowed at him. Harry scurried from the cupboard, narrowly avoiding a kick to his behind.*

*Rushing into the kitchen he started putting breakfast on. At one point, Petunia felt he wasn't working fast enough, so she hit him in the head. His face bounced off the counter, his lip split and started to bleed...*

Molly, Ginny and Hermione had returned from their trip to the Burrow and all three wanted to tell Harry about the new family sized, deluxe cauldron they had just finished watching the contractor install. Approaching the door to Harry's room, they heard a strange sound. Looking at each other with concern, they opened the door to the room, thinking it was another Voldemort attack.

Harry sat in a chair in the sitting room. On the table before him lay the Pensieve. It was projecting an image above the Pensieve as well as into Harry's mind. Harry's eyes were glazed over, his mind stuck in the vision. The three women froze in shock, watching the image floating above the Pensieve.

*Harry looked to be eight or nine years old. One eye was swollen shut and his lip was still oozing blood. He wore no shirt and the bruises from multiple hits with a belt were obvious on his back, some new, some days old. Carefully, he placed his glasses on a shelf.*

*Little Harry crawled onto his bed, his movements slow and obviously painful. He pulled a threadbare blanket over his thin frame and cried “Mum... Dad... why did you leave me? Can't I please be with you? Please? I promise I'll be good, and I won't eat too much.” Sobbing softly he cried himself to sleep, shivering in the cold.*

The vision faded out.

The Pensieve at that point released Harry, who sat back, his eyes unfocused. He pulled himself into a tight ball. It was all the more frightening because he made no sound. He just lay there trembling, taking no notice of the others in the room.

Molly glanced at the two girls. Both had tears in their eyes and were clutching each other, horrified by what they had just witnessed. Both had known some of the details of Harry's life prior to coming to Hogwarts, but this vision brought a kind of strange reality to it. Now it wasn't just a tale reported second hand, it was brutally real for both of them. And to see a child praying to join his dead parents...pleading with them?

Molly spoke to the two girls in a hushed tone. “Hermione, why don't you and Ginny go visit your parents for a while? Harry will need you later, but right now I think I better handle this alone.”

The two girls nodded and silently left the room as Molly turned back to Harry. He was still oblivious to her presence. She walked over to him and tried to touch him, but Harry flinched away, like he expected her to strike him.

Molly frowned. None of her children had ever flinched away from her before. But then, none of her children ever experienced anything like this either. Kneeling down in front of Harry she called to him softly.

“Harry... Harry dear, its Molly... time to come back to us love...”

Slowly, Harry’s eyes focused on her. She could see the pain, made fresh by that vision, in his eyes. His normally bright gaze made dull with anguish.

In a whisper he asked her, “Will you leave me too? My parents did. Sirius did. Why does everyone I love go away?”

The question tore at Molly. This was the crux of his fear. He was afraid being left behind by the people he loved. She wiped his cheek gently as only a mother can do, and she felt her own tears flowing freely.

“No love, we’ll never leave you. We’re your family now and we’ll never leave you.”

Harry reached out to her and she pulled him close and both wept. He wept for parents he never got the chance to know. Molly cried, cursing the fates that could be so cruel to a child.

She held him until he cried himself out. Helping him into bed, she brushed his hair away from his forehead and spoke soothingly to him until he drifted off to sleep. She gazed down at his still form and wept bitter tears for the boy...her son...who’d never been allowed a childhood.

Entering the kitchen a short time later, she stopped and gazed around. Everyone was looking at her with grim expressions. Both Ron and Arthur looked like they wanted to hit something. Remus sat, holding Tonks’ hand tightly. Both looked angry. Ginny clung to Arthur and Hermione gripped her mother. Emma and Dan looked to be nearly as upset as the girls were.

Molly broke the silence first. “I guess there was no hiding this in the first place. Harry’s asleep and will probably sleep for a few hours. The poor dear exhausted himself crying. He’ll probably be down for dinner though.”

Ron stepped up to his mother and looking at her searchingly. Molly seemed startled by how tall he was. Ron placed one hand on her shoulder and said softly, “Mum, I am so sorry for what Harry is going through, but is it wrong for me to say I’m glad you’re my mum? Being poor may not be fun, but being unloved is far worse. If anyone can help Harry, it’s you and our family.”

Molly grabbed her son in a fierce hug, while both Hermione and Arthur looked on approvingly at Ron and Molly.

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### **Hogwarts, Noon, Severus leaves the infirmary...**

Severus entered the apartment, annoyed and put out with Dumbledore. It wasn’t enough that he’d had to spend the night in the infirmary with Poppy hovering over him. Shackbolt had returned that morning with dozens of questions about the test. Once he had left, the Headmaster insisted that Severus join him for lunch to talk over the potion and what it could mean for their side.

*And if that man offers me one more damn lemon drop, I will not be responsible for my actions!*  
He thought furiously, as he slammed the door closed and marched into the living room.

“Severus? Is that you?” Serena called from the potions lab.

“Who else would it be wife? You still have the charm on the door!” He replied grumpily.

Stripping off his robe and thinking of nothing more than a hot shower, he was intercepted by Serena. She came streaking out of the lab and flew into his arms. Grunting at the impact, his arms wrapping around her automatically, he scowled.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing! How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. I was fine last night and I’m fine now.”

Pulling back, she looked up at him and frowned. “My aren’t we the grumpy one? You look tired.”

“I’m not tired. I am annoyed, however. I would have been back sooner but Poppy…”

“You’re sure you’re alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine! Poppy released me, didn’t she? But Shacklebolt came back with questions and then Dumbledore and his damn lemon drops…”

Interrupting him, she said, “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Severus. I’ve got something to show you!” Grabbing his hand, she pulled him towards the lab.

“Serena, if you don’t mind, I’d like to have a shower first,” he said irritably.

“That can wait. You have to see this.”

As they entered the lab, Severus stopped in shock, causing Serena to jerk to a halt. What the hell? The lab was a wreck! Broken bottles and ripped parchment littered the floor. Cabinets were thrown open, their contents scattered everywhere. The desk was covered with books and papers and…was that a melted cauldron?

“Serena?” He croaked. “What on earth…?”

“I know it’s a mess. I’ll clean it later. What until you see…”

“Clean it later? Serena, you’re never like this! One cannot brew anything effectively in a garbage pit! What the hell were you thinking?”

“I found the key, Severus. It was right in front of us the whole time and we missed it!”

“Key? What are you blathering about, woman? Merlin, it looks like the final battle took place in this room. Or worse, Neville Longbottom took over the lab!” Moving to the cabinets, he began to



clean up the mess, scowling. “How you can get anything done in here is beyond me. This is the most...”

“Would you listen to me,” Serena barked in frustration. As Severus whipped around to stare at her, she rolled her eyes.

“I started working on a salve for Harry’s scar last night,” she explained.

“Serena, many people have worked on that for the past six years. Myself included. No one has found...”

“LISTEN!” She bellowed at him, throwing an empty bottle against the wall. Severus’ jaw dropped. *What the hell?*

“I am not one of your students to lecture and intimidate, you bloody man! You will stand there and you will listen to what I have to say, or so help me Severus, Filch will be scrapping up what’s left of you from the lab floor!”

As she began to pace, Severus wisely kept his mouth shut. *It’s got to be the Latin temper*, he thought. *Unless she’s pregnant... Oh Merlin!* His wandering thoughts were jerked back to his wife as she started to speak.

“All that nonsense the pure-blood community spouts about primitive magic being weak has had a blinding affect on any meaningful research into Harry’s scar. No one has been willing to look into its influence at a blood level!”

“Serena, I don’t understand...”

“Blood magic, Severus! The boy has been protected by blood magic for years!”

“I hardly think...” He shut his mouth when she picked up another empty bottle and glared at him.

“For nearly sixteen years, that young man has been under the protection of blood magic. It wasn’t just his aunt’s blood, Severus. It was his mothers! The same blood flowing through his veins! Look,” she said, waving to the magnified blood samples projected above the desk. “The sample on the right is from his arm. The one on the left is from the scar. Can’t you see it?”

Frowning, he moved closer to the projected images. There *were* differences...small ones, true, but definite differences in the samples. *A thicker cell membrane...if they combined...*

Turning slowly, he looked at his wife in astonishment. “But that would mean...”

“Yes! Even if I hadn’t made mistakes with the potion, it still wouldn’t have worked because the key ingredient was missing! The potion itself, brewed correctly of course, is the base. But the blood magic is the key.”

Walking quickly to a cooling cauldron near her desk, she waved him over. “It still needs to be tested of course, but I think I’ve done it.”

Looking into the cauldron, Severus saw a clear, congealed substance. As he reached to dip a finger into the mixture, Serena slapped his hand.

“Now who needs a lecture, Professor?” She asked. Reaching for a sterile swab, she extracted a small amount of the salve and handed it to him. “It won’t work for you, or anyone else, of course. It’s specifically designed for Harry.”

Examining the swab closely revealed nothing new. Looking at Serena in puzzlement, Severus asked, “But how, Serena?”

“The blood, of course. One drop of unaffected blood for his mother’s sacrifice and one drop of altered blood for his bond to Voldemort, added to the base potion. It’s useless for anyone else because of the blood magic, but it does have an interesting effect.”

Taking the swab from him, she brushed it across the back of his hand, saying, “The Ph balance in the skin dictates the color change. It’s red for me.” As they watched, the area turned brown. Looking into his eyes with a devilish expression she asked, “Fancy a tan, Professor Snape?”

Laughing at his stunned expression, she threw her arms around his neck. “I think I’ve done it. We’ll need to test it, but I’m sure it’ll work.” Pulling back, she placed a hand on his cheek and continued seriously, “I couldn’t just stand by and watch him suffer any longer. Harry’s been through too much in his short life. He took away your Dark Mark, took away the pain Voldemort was causing you. I had to do something, Severus.”

He nodded in understanding as a small thrill of satisfaction coursed through him. To give something back to the boy who gave everything? Amazing! Wrapping his arms around her, he picked her up and spun her around, laughing at her shriek of surprise.

With her feet once more on the ground, she smiled up at him mischievously. “I believe you said something about wanting a shower? Merlin knows I need one!”

At his questioning expression, she grabbed his hand and, with a wicked look in her eyes, dragged him out of the lab.

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### **Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes...**

George and Fred opened the shop a little early. For the last week or more, nothing serious had happened and they figured the prank war was over. Fred accepted the morning supply delivery and anxiously sorted through the boxes. They had a new product in mind and both of them wanted to get an early start on it.

Fred looked at one box, carefully. It seemed a little light, but it was from the correct supplier. *Maybe they just had to back ship something*, he thought.

Walking over to George at the counter, Fred took out a box opener. It never paid to open a box of magical supplies using magic. They’d learned that early enough in their career. It had taken days for the feathers to disappear!

Deftly slicing the box open, he lifted the lid and froze. George looked over his shoulder and, gasping, froze also.

Inside the box was something truly ugly. It sported long floppy white ears and a white cottontail. But that's where the similarity ended. It flapped its leather wings and, with glowing red eyes, looked balefully at the two men.

George whispered to Fred, "That's a B... B... Bunnybat! They're deadly!"

Fred whispered back, "No I think it depends on if it's an American or Asian Bunnybat."

"Do you know what kind it is?"

"Of course not... remember we dropped out of school in our first NEWT year, Hagrid hadn't gotten to Bunnybats before we left. I don't even remember which type is deadly."

The two took a slow step back from the counter. The Bunnybat burst from the box and started flying around the shop. Both men reached for their wands and shouted as one.

"STUPEFY!"

The Bunnybat halted in its flight and an ominous voice boomed in the shop.

"TSK TSK BOYS, THAT WASN'T VERY SMART!"

"MARAUDERS RULE! WEASLEY'S DROOL!"

"WE AWAIT YOUR FORMAL SURRENDER!"

The Bunnybat was enveloped in a huge cloud of smoke and a deep rumbling sound was heard. The cloud was lit by hundreds of flashes of light. With each flash a new Bunnybat shot from the cloud. They were flying everywhere!

Fred and George tried to make it to the exit but, every time they tried, the Bunnybats would cluster in front of them, forcing them back. Finally, they took refuge under the counter.

Over the din of the hundreds of flying Bunnybats they could hear the door chime ring as someone entered.

"Wotcher Fred... Oy what's this?"

Fred and George looked at each other in relief! THEY WERE SAVED! Tonks was an Auror! She'd save them.

They rose from behind the counter just in time to see Tonks raise her wand. Crying out, they tried to stop her, but were too late. Tonks managed to stupefy five bunnybats at one time. Tonks, hiding her grin, ducked back out the door as the twins looked on in horror, hearing five sets of voices echoing...

“TSK TSK BOYS, DIDN’T YOU LEARN THE FIRST TIME?”

“MARAUDERS RULE! WEASLEY’S DROOL!”

“WE STILL AWAIT YOUR FORMAL SURRENDER!”

Outside of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes, a small crowd had gathered, laughing at the mayhem coming from within the shop.

Tonks walked over to Remus, Harry and Ginny with a grin on her face. She snickered and said to the group, “Mischief...”

“...Managed!” The three replied, grinning evilly.

Having finished their shopping, the four linked their arms together and walked off to meet Hermione and Ron at the ice cream shop, laughing merrily.

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### **Grimmauld Place...**

Remus and Molly sat at the table each drinking a cup of tea. They had just seen the kids off on the Hogwarts Express and were finally able to relax.

Suddenly the door burst open and Fred and George Weasley erupted into the room. Spotting Remus they ran to him and fell to their knees.

“Remus our blessed friend...”

“...You have to get in touch...”

“...with your Marauder friends...”

“...tell them we surrender...”

“...we bow to their magnificence!..”

“...we’ll kiss the ground they walk on...”

“...we’ll lick their boots...”

“...and hold their coats...”

“...ANYTHING, but we surrender!”

Remus gave the two a long, slow look before telling them that he’d pass the message along.

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## Chapter 10 A Time of Attacks.

### Return to Hogwarts...

The return to Hogwarts was surprisingly uneventful. Even Malfoy hadn't made his customary intrusion, much to the annoyance of the others. Malfoy was a git and a wanker to be sure, but his customary appearance on the train made the ride a little more interesting.

As the trip progressed, Ron asked Harry if he wanted to play wizard's chess. Harry replied he had something more fun in mind. Ron's face lit up and he nodded eagerly, and then tapped Neville on the shoulder. The three exchanged a look. It was totally silent, this primal male communication, but it got the point across. The girls, each absorbed in a book, were oblivious. On cue, each boy pulled the book from their hands and kissed them. Each girl was shocked and caught off guard. Hermione actually tried protesting for a moment before giving in. Ginny moved over to Harry's lap. Soon the other two had moved to the appropriate laps as well.

There was a disembodied snicker from the doorway...

Harry broke his kiss for a moment and said; "Not now Auntie... we're busy!" With a wave of his hand the door to the compartment slid softly shut and the curtains closed. Harry returned to his very special red headed witch thinking, *this is better than Malfoy!*

He never even heard the hissed reply, "Don't call me Auntie!"

In fact, his most fervent wish at that point was for the others to leave the compartment so he could be alone with Ginny. She was doing things to him that seriously tested his resolve, something she would have been happy to know!

Several hours later, they arrived at Hogwarts. The boys looked a bit dazed, while the girls were quite smug.

As the students were finishing up the evening meal, Professor Serena Snape approached Harry, Ginny and the rest at the Gryffindor table and asked if she could join them for a moment. At their surprised looks, she smiled. After all, a teacher joining one of the house tables was unheard of!

Recovering a bit quicker than the others, Harry blurted, "Um... Yes! Of course Professor."

His discomfiture made her smile widened but she sat down and decided to plunge right in anyway.

"Harry, I don't want to get your hopes up too high, but I've made a salve which, if I'm correct, may block most of the pain you feel from your scar. I had no way of testing it until you came back from Holiday. The salve is keyed to your blood Harry, so it won't do a thing for anyone else. And just to be on the safe side, I've made plenty of it, enough to last you for at least a couple years, in fact. You apply it directly to your scar and the surrounding area. I'm not sure how long it lasts, so let's try twice a day. Remember, if you bathe, you need to reapply it."

Harry looked at the small pot she held like it was full of precious jewels. His hands trembled as he took the salve from her. She took his chin in her hand and tilted his head up so she could look him in the eye. "Harry..." she said gently, "... this may not work, or it may not block all of the

pain. Keep that in mind when you try it, hmm? If you have any problems, or if it doesn't work, let me know as soon as possible."

The rest of the group sat staring at them, their eyes roving between Harry, the salve in its pot, and Professor Snape. Finally Harry broke the stasis between them all by whispering a "Thank you, Professor."

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### **Later that evening, Headmaster's office, Hogwarts...**

It was late. Albus Dumbledore sat at his desk reading some dispatches from Order members. Fawkes suddenly broke into a song, announcing an arrival. Dumbledore wasn't expecting anyone, and the floo remained quiet. He sat back in his chair expectantly.

There was a flash of flame and Wings appeared, hovered for a moment and then transformed into Harry.

"Ah Harry, I had hoped we'd be able to speak. Your method of arriving is almost as unconventional as your other abilities. Please, sit down. Would you care for a lemon drop?"

Declining the offered sweet, Harry sat in the chair facing Dumbledore and thought for a moment, before speaking.

"Professor, I know we've had our differences, and we'll probably never be able to go back to the type of relationship we once had. But I feel that we've managed to develop a close enough working relationship that the time is quickly approaching for us to speak openly."

Harry looked at Dumbledore who nodded for him to continue.

"I won't say everything between us is fixed Sir, but I'm ready to reveal certain things that have been kept hidden from you. Mind you, I'm not going for a complete disclosure. Some things I intend to reserve the right to keep secret for now. To that end Sir, I'm willing to offer to ally myself to your cause. That is if you're willing to accept the following conditions."

Dumbledore raised one eyebrow.

"I'll be willing to reveal some things to you Sir, tomorrow night in the Room of Requirement. I would also like Professors Snape, McGonagall, Ron and Ginny Weasley and Hermione Granger present. My friends have been in on this from the beginning and know much of what I'm going to show and tell you. Some they will be seeing for the first time. I'd like Professors Snape there because I trust them, as I trust Professor McGonagall and as I hope I can trust you, Sir.

In addition to that, I can tell you for certain that things are quickly coming to a climax. Events will be happening that may result in students being affected and having their grades impacted as a result of this. I would like your word that, if that happens, you will personally appeal to the testing boards to allow the students to retake their exams. I don't want to see any student's career choices harmed because of this war. I don't care what happens to myself, but I don't want to see anyone else hurt by this. If this is acceptable to you, I'd like for all of us to meet at the Room of Requirement tomorrow night after dinner."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair thinking. *He's offering to talk, and he's not really asking for much. Any event that disrupts the students would have me fighting for them anyway. I don't see any problem inviting the Professors, but his friends? What role do they play in this? On the other hand, if we are to work together, I should accept these terms. They are not unacceptable.*

“Very well Harry, I’ll accept your terms. Perhaps tomorrow night will be an eye-opening experience for all of us.”

Harry smiled with relief. *That was easy*, he thought.

“Thank you Sir. With that said, I think I should return to my dorm room.” Nodding to the Headmaster, Harry stood, transformed into Wings again and flame traveled back to his dorm.

Albus Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, before speaking. “Well Fawkes, seems our Harry is full of surprises. He is growing up fast.”

Fawkes tilted his head, looked at Albus and thought; *you have no idea, old friend. No idea at all.*

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### **Breakfast, the next morning, Hogwarts...**

Harry walked into the Great Hall; he had just taken a shower after his early morning run with Ginny. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were already in their seats. Harry was one of those people that seemed to revel in taking long showers. For some reason, he loved the feeling of the water, and always came away from one refreshed and feeling purified.

He kissed Ginny and sat down to eat. As he filled his plate, he told Ron and Hermione to pass the word that the DA would not meet tonight. He explained that the four of them would be meeting instead with the professors at the Room of Requirement after dinner. It was time to take a few risks, but he cautioned them not to mention the DA at all, nor their unusual training methods, in front of the Headmaster. There were some secrets that he’d still like to keep. After a few minutes, he suggested that perhaps the DA should have two nights off, and suggested that Ron might be able to find a use for the second free night.

Ron looked up bewildered for a moment before it dawned on him. He looked over Hermione and blushed while Hermione looked at Ron with a pleased smile. Ginny slid her hand under the table and squeezed Harry’s leg in satisfaction. That made Harry wish he had reserved the room for himself and Ginny instead!

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### **The Room of Requirement, that same evening, Hogwarts...**

Harry showed up at the Room of Requirement, his Pensieve in hand. Everyone was already there, so he led them all into the room after setting the requirements. The room looked to be a combination of a small lounge, with chairs opening in to a large combat training area. He asked everyone to be seated as he set up the Pensieve. He extracted two memories and placed them into the Pensieve as everyone settled in.

Smiling, he looked at them all and said, "I'd like to thank everyone for coming tonight. It's time for me to reveal some truths, which you all need to be aware of. I realize that some of what I intend to reveal tonight you will have to tell others. I only ask that you do not reveal me as the source of the information. Some of you already know most of these truths, but I can assure you, no one, not even myself, knows them all.

When I returned to Privet Drive last summer, I had a series of visions, three of them, in fact. Tonight, I will reveal to you two of them. I'll be showing them to you out of order, so that you can ponder the meaning of the third vision, while watching the first.

Let me state that at the time of these visions, I was a mental wreck. Barely a day went by when I didn't feel the weight of the world on my shoulders. On more than one occasion I actually contemplated suicide, but something stayed my hand. The night I had these visions something in me changed. I won't say I haven't had some bad moments since then, but it was like a turning point for me.

In any event, one night I awoke and had a series of three visions, back to back. They were very short and it was only with the use of the Pensieve that I was able to really examine them in detail. The first vision you'll see came last, and it explained to me the purpose of the other two. I'm playing this first so you can understand what you're going to see when I play the first vision for you.

I would suggest viewing the first vision without entering the memory itself. It's pretty self explanatory."

With that Harry activated the Pensieve. Floating above the bowl, a large image appeared.

*Again the light flared; when it cleared he was standing near a small thatched cottage. Nearby was a small pond. Strangely, he felt at peace. Noticing smoke rising from the chimney he walked over to the door and knocked.*

*The door opened and a merry voice from within called him in. "Come in my boy, I'm glad you finally decided to visit me."*

*The room was sparsely furnished, an armchair by the fire, some books on a shelf, a bed, a table and a few kitchen chairs. In one of the chairs sat an old man, a very old man from the look of him. The man reminded him of someone, but he couldn't put a name to the face. All he knew was it was a kindly face. Whoever this man was, he was a friend.*

*"Come in Harry, I've been expecting you for some time and no doubt you have loads of questions for me. Unfortunately, our time is very short, so I'll get right to the point. The visions you have experienced are not nightmares Harry. They are visions of the future. Unlike the past, the future can be altered. What you saw is what will be, should you fail in your task. You've been given tremendous power Harry, more so than any other wizard, except perhaps for myself. In time you'll come to learn to use all of that power, but Tom won't give you the time to learn it all. You have to learn to master what you can now and rely on your greatest strength. Your ability to love Harry, its your greatest weapon, if you can harness it."*

*In the distance there was a pealing of a bell. Instead of the harsh bongs of before, this was a joyous sound. The room started to brighten slowly and the old man started to slowly fade out.*



*“Wait! Who are you Sir? Will I ever see you again?” Harry cried.*

*The words came to him softly as if from a great distance, “Yes child, we’ll meet again. Trust in yourself Harry and follow your destiny.”*

The vision faded out and Harry began to speak again.

“Like I said, this was pretty tame. All it told me was that the earlier two visions were images of WHAT MAY BE, if I fail. Who that old man is I can’t say. All I can say is while speaking to him and afterwards I felt completely different. My grieving for Sirius finally ended and since then I have been determined to do what I had to do. The old man gave me peace, of sorts. I didn’t stay there long, but I wish I had. I think I would have liked to talk to him, or just listen to whatever he had to tell me.

The next vision we’ll see is not particularly pretty or happy. I’ll understand if anyone doesn’t want to enter the memory, but it’s necessary for us to freeze the image at a particular point. We’ll need to travel around a bit in the memory in order for you to see what I need to show you. Mind you, we’ll start in the air and drop to the ground. It’s painless, although a bit frightening at first. If everyone’s ready, I’ll start the second vision, freeze it at a particular point, and then we’ll enter the memory.”

Everyone nodded at this.

*Harry bolted upright, unsure if he had really heard something, or merely dreamt it. Through his window he could see a waning moon. Staring dully at the moon, it suddenly flared to a searing bright light. When his vision cleared he found himself in the air, flying above the town of Hogsmeade. Looking down he saw that many of the buildings were burning; a few had even collapsed upon themselves. Bodies littered the street...*

Harry froze the memory at that point. “If everyone is ready, we’ll enter the memory.” Looking over to Ron, Hermione and Ginny he said, “Just touch your wand to the Pensieve. I’ll do the rest.”

With everyone touching the Pensieve, he activated the memory. Suddenly, Ginny grabbed at him as everyone fell at a stately pace to the ground. Everyone looked around, and then turned to Harry, expectantly. He sighed

“Yes, this is Hogsmeade, and this is what it will look like less than six months time. I know it’s not pretty, but there is more to see...”

Harry led them towards Honeydukes. Both Hermione and Ginny, cried out seeing Tonks leaning against the wall. Harry murmured, “I think she’s only unconscious, not dead.”

Stopping in front of Honeydukes, Harry pointed to the sign in the window.

“ON SALE NOW, FROM MAY 15th TO THE END OF THE MONTH, CHOCOLATE FROGS HALF OFF!”

“I’m sorry Headmaster, but that’s the best time frame I can give you. I’ve searched every part of this memory for a better idea and found nothing. All I can say is that, sometime between May 15th and May 31st, Hogsmeade will be attacked. Judging by the damage and the bodies, the attacking force will overwhelm the defenders.”

Harry ended the vision, pulling everyone out of the memory. He sat down in a chair and waited for reactions. Dumbledore and Severus looked grim; McGonagall had turned white. His friends, and surprisingly, Serena Snape, looked determined.

Finally Dumbledore spoke.

“Harry, I’m glad you shared this with us. This is important, although I do agree that narrowing down the projected date of attack would have benefited us greatly. I will talk to Amelia Bones, the Director of the Aurors, and we will begin preparations to defend Hogsmeade. Not knowing the exact date makes it harder to bring our forces to bear, but forewarned is forearmed, as the muggles say. As it turns out, we have been picking up some rumbling among our informers that an attack of major proportions was planned. We didn’t know where, or when. Now that we know where and approximately when, we’ll be able to take some steps. Is this all you wanted to show us Harry?”

“No, Sir. I have two more things to reveal tonight. Over the past couple months, even before we started working with the crystals, Professor Snape and I have been working on a problem I’ve been having with the amount of power needed to perform a spell. Professor Snape has forbidden me from dueling in his class because of that problem and I totally agree with the decision. If you’ll allow, I’d like Professor Snape to explain the problem, then I’ll add a conclusion which I came to only recently.”

Everyone turned to Professor Snape; he cleared his throat and began to speak.

“The problem has to do with the amount of energy he has, Headmaster. For example, a Reducto from myself is not much different in power than one from Miss Granger or Mad-Eye Moody. We have a limited amount of magical energy that we can put into a casting. Think of it as a pipe carrying water. We all have the same size pipe. In Harry’s case, his pipe is larger than usual. He and I have been working on controlling the amount of power he puts into a casting, but he’s been unable to get it to an instinctual level yet. He still has to consciously decide how much power to put into his casting. If Harry has an idea as to why he can’t get this down to an instinctual level, I’d certainly like to hear it.”

Harry looked at Professor Snape and said, “Sir, I’m not totally positive about this, but I believe the reason I can’t nail it down is simple. The pipe is still growing in size.”

Snape’s eyes widened in surprise “Yes that would make it nearly impossible for you to control the level instinctually because the power you can tap is still enlarging! Astounding! But your magical level should have stopped growing when you hit puberty. How is it that yours continued beyond that point?”

Dumbledore broke in. “Severus, generally that’s true, but my own power continued to grow for more than two years past the onset of puberty. I agree it is astounding, but not entirely unheard of. Voldemort continued his growth until sometime in his seventeenth year. I think, power wise, it’s quite possible that the prophecy is right. Harry will meet Voldemort as an equal. And after that,

who knows? His power may continue to grow for several more years. Legend has it Merlin didn't stop until he was twenty-four, and Godric Gryffindor stopped at twenty.

Yes, that explains why Harry can't control his power yet. And I agree. Having him duel in class would be a grave mistake at this point."

Returning his gaze to the young man in question, Dumbledore asked, "I believe you said you had two other issues to discuss with us? What is the second issue?"

Harry looked embarrassed but said, "Sir, the last item isn't really something to discuss. It's something you'll need to see. For the safety of everyone in the room, I'll cast two spectator shields in front of the opening in the combat arena."

Harry removed his shoes and socks, then peeled out of his robe and removed his shirt and undershirt. Smirking slightly, he turned to Severus and said, "Pay back Sir, for all those times I had to look at your chest."

Serena snickered as her husband rolled his eyes.

Harry turned to Ginny and asked her to hold his clothing for him. He had to ask her twice before she actually heard him, as she was busy examining his naked torso. He chuckled and kissed her on the forehead. She didn't seem to notice, as she was still staring at him with a slightly dazed expression on her face.

It was true that Harry had bulked up considerably this past year. His chest was hairless, and his torso was leanly muscled, like a runner rather than a weight lifter. Hermione snickered at Ginny's reaction to seeing Harry without his shirt.

Turning away, he removed the forearm wand holster he was wearing and placed the holster and the wand on the table. Seeing the shocked looks directed his way, he shrugged.

"It only slows me down," Harry explained.

Stepping out into the arena area, he cast two spectator shields to ensure the safety of the onlookers.

Pausing, he waited a moment, his eyes closed, centering himself. He could feel the magic rising up within him. He silently invoked the incantation to start the simulation.

His eyes snapped open as a simulated opponent appeared, dressed as a Death Eater. The Death Eater cast a Crucio at him, which he easily dodged before returning fire with a bludgeoning spell, which blew through the Death Eater's shield. The opponent fell to the ground and faded from sight.

Before the first opponent was gone, two more appeared. Harry physically dodged a cutting hex and a flame spell. He then downed one opponent with a cutting hex, literally slicing the opponent in two. The second opponent got off another curse, causing Harry's shield to flare ominously. Before Harry could drop the second opponent, four more appeared. Harry's speed continued to increase as he hurled spells.

Inside the room, four professors and Harry's friends watched as he continued to battle. Severus stood up in consternation.

"Headmaster, those opponents are casting at full strength. Some of them are even casting Unforgiveables!"

Dumbledore nodded grimly, the twinkle gone from his eye. "I know Severus. But with the spectator shields in place, we can do nothing to stop this."

The group watched as Harry continued to battle, dropping opponents only to have them replaced. Harry seemed to take on an eerie glow, as he called up more and more of his magic. His eyes flared with an icy green fire and the group gasped on more than one occasion when a spell blasted into the shields protecting them.

Harry seemed to blur for a moment. One moment he was standing next to the wall, the next he was five feet away from the wall. Harry's movements were nearly too fast to see at this point.

"That's not apparating. What was that?" Severus asked.

Harry had dropped nearly 20 opponents, but he was still facing 18 others. Finally, he was hit with a strange spell that cast a blue light. It sailed right through his shield, hitting Harry in the shoulder. He spun into the wall and slumped to the floor. His opponents stopped immediately and faded away, as did the spectator shields.

Harry's friends and the Professors stood there for a moment in shock, not quite sure what to do, while Harry slowly lifted himself to a sitting position. Ginny finally broke the paralysis they were under by bolting to him. She helped him sit up. The others joined her, clustering around him, who was leaning against the wall. He was breathing heavily, sporting a few cuts from near misses, a bruise was forming on his chest, and there was one particularly nasty cut on his shoulder.

Ginny stood up and took a step backwards. Dumbledore appeared to want to say something, but she held up a hand imperiously and motioned him to be silent. Then she turned back to Harry.

"HARRY JAMES POTTER! WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING? ARE YOU THAT STUPID? YOU COULD HAVE BEEN KILLED! THOSE THINGS WERE CASTING VERY DANGEROUS SPELLS! LOOK AT YOU, BLEEDING, BRUISED! ARE YOU THAT SELFISH? WHAT ABOUT ME? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW I FELT HAVING HAD TO WATCH YOU OUT HERE AND KNOW THERE WAS NOTHING I COULD DO TO HELP YOU...?"

Harry sat there, wincing as Ginny continued her tirade at the top of her lungs. The four Professors exchanged amused looks with each other. As her tirade continued, she expanded upon her first comments, repeated a few, and questioned whether he had been dropped on his head as an infant. Then she moved into the future, asking if he expected her to raise their children alone because he had gotten himself killed. She questioned his love for her, his feeling for her. With each scathing comment, Harry looked more stricken.

Finally, Ginny wound down, her arms across her chest, a foot tapping the sand, finishing up with a "...WELL? I'M WAITING FOR AN EXPLANATION MR. POTTER!"

Harry mumbled something unintelligible, looking at the floor. Before she could snap at him again, Dumbledore broke in.

“Ginny, a moment please... Harry, in some ways I have to agree with Miss Weasley. Some of the spells being used here tonight were extremely dangerous. I’d like to hear your explanation as well.”

Harry looked up and spoke in a flat tone. He spoke to them all, but his gaze was clearly on Ginny and, within his eyes, was a clear plea for understanding.

“I had thought you would all understand... you know what I’m up against... I have to do this... Voldemort won’t be casting stupefies...” his voice dropped lower, “... if I’m to have any chance to live through this, to live the way I want to live, I have to get ready Gin. If I don’t, then I won’t survive...”

He trailed off, still searching Ginny’s eyes. Then he sighed and looked down to the floor again. Ginny stood there in shock.

*He’s doing this for me...for us? She thought. Every night he’s letting himself get beat up just so he can prepare for his meeting with Voldemort? He’s trying to insure our survival and I’m yelling at him about it. Oh Gods, the things I said! He must really hate me now!*

Ginny knelt next to Harry and pulled his head up simply by grabbing him by the ears and tugging. She gave him a small smile. He smiled back and wrapped his arms around her. The two held each other, oblivious to the onlookers, until someone coughed. Harry blushed; Ginny pulled back and helped him to his feet.

Once on his feet, Harry looked around and murmured, “Since I see I’m probably going to get yelled at a few times, why not let us all be a little more comfortable?”

The room shimmered and seemed to alter around them. Everyone got a little dizzy as the combat arena vanished and the room transformed itself into a cozy room with several couches and plush armchairs. Off in one corner a fireplace blazed. Harry limped over to a couch and sat down heavily. With Hermione’s help, Ginny started working on healing his cuts.

Before any teacher could say a word, Ron chimed in. “Harry that was BLOODY BRILLIANT! I’ve never seen anyone fight like that before!”

Hermione shot Ron a look that said, ‘Shut up or die!’

Dumbledore looked at Ron with mild amusement, his eyes twinkling again. Then he turned to Harry.

“How long have you been training like this? When did you learn?”

“Since the beginning of the school year Sir. I’d sneak down to our common room, transform into my phoenix form and flame travel directly into the Room of Requirement...”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at that, but motioned for him to continue.

“Anyway, I’d sneak down here every night after curfew and spend at least an hour at it, sometimes two. Most nights I don’t get beaten this badly, but I don’t seem to be able to get past 18 simultaneous opponents either. That’s another block I’ve been working on, with little success I might add. Merlin knows I’ve tried, but once I hit that number it’s all over for me.”

“Harry one thing strikes me as curious. Your opponents seemed to be casting Unforgiveables at you. I recall seeing several Cruciatus curses and even a few Imperios, but you never tried to cast one back. Why not?”

Harry stared at his feet and remained quiet.

“Harry? This is supposed to be a night for revealing truths...”

Harry looked up at the Headmaster, his eyes filled with tears. “Sir... I’ve tried... I’ve studied the Dark Art spells. I’ve even tried casting the killing curse on a simulacrum but I can’t!”

Harry pounded his fist on the side of the couch he was sitting on before continuing.

“I know I’m supposed to kill Voldemort, but all those kind of spells are Dark Art spells! Every time I try to cast one, I either feel an intense pain, or the curse is so weak as to not work, like that time with Lestrange at the Ministry, or it simply doesn’t work at all! Even the simpler Dark Art spells, the ones a first year could do, don’t work for me... How am I to kill Voldemort when all I can draw on are Light Art and Neutral Art spells?”

“Harry, there are still hundreds of spells for you to draw upon. Perhaps more. I think, when the time comes, you’ll know what to do. And I am somewhat comforted by the fact that you can’t use the Dark Art spells.

Now, about this training of yours,” Dumbledore continued. “I suppose if I forbid you to continue training like this, you’ll ignore me and continue anyway?”

“I’d really rather not have to do it that way Sir, but if necessary, I will,” Harry replied, his voice tinged with steel.

“Very well. I can see the need for you to train, in fact I had in mind something similar for you at the start of term, but not quite so energetic. How about we compromise Harry? I’ll give you a permanent pass so you won’t have to sneak here every night, if you agree to eliminate some of the more dangerous spells AND you never train alone. Either a Professor, or one of your friends, will be here to make sure you not seriously injured. I’ll give you a pass for one of your friends as well.”

“I can live with that Sir. To be honest, it does get a bit lonely down here all by myself. And I’d really like the opportunity to talk with Professor Snape about Death Eater tactics. I’ve been on the receiving end of them a few times, but I’d like to know more about them. The Professor is the only one I know who has the experience.”

“Harry, I am a little curious. How do you manage to control the Room of...”

Professor Snape cut off the Headmaster. “I can explain that Sir, but later, if you don’t mind.”

Harry and Dumbledore looked at Severus curiously. Dumbledore finally nodded in agreement.

*What's that all about?* Harry wondered. Severus spoke up at that point, distracting him from his thoughts.

“Harry, while you were fighting, I noticed you seemed to be doing something which looked like apparation, but wasn't. There was no popping sound. You just seemed to move from one point to another without any movement in-between. Can you explain that?”

Harry grimaced and replied, “I'm afraid it's not very useful Sir. I wanted to learn to apparate, but the Ministry rules say no one underage can get their hands on the manual. The books are all age spelled, so even the library copies are blank when I open one. There were a few obscure references that referred to parts of the technique in the library. I tried to take their technique and apply it. Unfortunately, it didn't work. Oh, I can move, but the best distance I've managed to accomplish is only about twenty or thirty feet. It is sort of useful in combat because I can bounce around, and I can use it to bring something to me...”

Harry paused briefly, smiled, and then suddenly Ginny was sitting on his lap. She gave a startled squeak, then smiled at him.

“But as you can see Sir, its not apparating. If anything, it's a miniature version of the same spell with some form of Accio thrown in. While I'm sure the Ministry had good reasons for putting an age limit on apparating, I don't think they are realistic. Everyone should learn to apparate. In many cases, it's better for people to escape from a fight, rather than stay and be killed.”

Severus looked thoughtful for a moment before turning to the Headmaster. “He has a valid point, Sir. With the war on, isn't there some way we can teach the students?”

“Do not get yourself worked up Severus. I have already spoken to Director Bones over this issue. This was one item I intended to share with everyone tonight. Director Bones has managed to get Minister Fudge to agree to the issuance of special permits that will cover fourth year students and above. The permits will allow for daytime apparation for students, so long as an adult accompanies them. In addition, the students will be allowed to apparate in times of emergency. Director Bones feels that the concepts should be taught as part of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classes. I'm sorry if this means more work for you Severus, but it's necessary in these times.

Now, unless there is something else to discuss,” Dumbledore continued, looking at those in the room, “I'd suggest we allow Harry and his friends to return to their common room before curfew. Harry, I want to thank you for the information you provided tonight. It will prove especially useful. Professors, remain a moment please.”

The four Professors watched Harry as he retrieved his Pensieve and his clothing, and filed out of the room with his friends.

After the students left, Dumbledore cast a silencing charm on the room. Then, turning to face Severus, he asked, “I believe you had something you wanted to explain to me?”

Professor Snape, managing to look a little embarrassed, replied, “Yes. It's something we hadn't told you about Harry. Professor McGonagall and Miss Granger discovered a few months back...”

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow, but motioned for him to continue.

“Sir you’ve no doubt noticed that Harry seems to be able to do things that most people know can’t be done. We figured that, as long as Harry didn’t know something was impossible, he’d either figure out that he couldn’t do it, or try it and have it work for him. He never knew that one couldn’t conjure noble metals or gemstones Headmaster. Minerva here even handed him a totally made up spell and he’s made it work.

When you started to ask him about the Room of Requirement, I had to step in, in case you were about to tell him that he couldn’t control the room from within. As you can see, he can. I’m sorry we didn’t tell you earlier Headmaster but, at the time, you and Harry weren’t speaking to each other.”

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, well I can understand that Severus. But this ability of his is perhaps the most interesting. I will think on it.”

Back in the Gryffindor Common Room, the two couples sat on the couch in front of the fire. All of the other students had gone up to their dorms already. Hermione glanced curiously at Harry before speaking.

“Harry, are you sure it was wise to show them all that? You gave away a lot of information tonight.”

“Mione, there’s an old muggle book that I’ve read, and Ron’s reading now. It’s called the Art Of War by Sun Tsu. In the book, the author says to show the enemy what you want him to see, so he’ll miss what you don’t want him to see. If I hadn’t given up some information tonight, Dumbledore would have kept digging. With the information about Hogsmeade, and what I’ve been doing, he’ll be distracted. I don’t fully trust him ‘Mione, but sooner or later, we’re going to need to work together. Even you can see that.

He doesn’t know about the DA, and that’s how it’s going to stay until we’re ready to reveal ourselves. Then he’ll have to listen to us.”

Facing Ron, he continued, “I want us to start practicing using Hogsmeade as the backdrop. The Room of Requirement will recreate it for us. Let’s plan on starting that at the next meeting.”

“Sounds good, Harry,” Ron said.

As Harry turned to the girls, Ron grinned, reached over and pulled Hermione into his lap. She looked at him in surprise for a moment, still not used to this side of him, before wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him passionately.

If Ron noticed Harry and Ginny smirking at them, he was past caring.

Ginny was about to turn back to Harry when he decided that Ron had a good idea. He silently Accio’d Ginny into his lap. She gave a little squeak before wrapping her arms around his neck.



Harry kissed her ardently and she could feel his arousal against her. She wiggled in his lap just to see his discomfort, before whispering, "We'll have to figure out how to take care of that." His only response was to kiss the nape of her neck, which caused her to shudder with delight.

A few minutes later, the two couples reluctantly broke apart and said their goodnights. As Harry started off to the dorm, Ron grabbed Hermione for one last kiss and told her that he couldn't wait for the time when they wouldn't have to sleep apart any longer.

At Hermione's wide-eyed gaze, he laughed, hugged her once more and turned to the door of the dorm. As she watched him leave, she thought, *I like this Ron, so much better than the old Ron. I really owe Harry for this!*

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### **Slytherin common room, that same night...**

Draco Malfoy sat on the couch in front of the fire, staring into the flames. It was late, and the other students had gone to bed. The holidays had been a disaster for Draco. His father, bitter over his lack of freedom since his escape, had not been well pleased with him. Lucius had heard about his problems with Serena Snape, and taunted his son over it. If his son couldn't handle a woman, what chance did he have with the Dark Lord?

It was a touchy subject. Since Draco's Head of House had been revealed as a spy, the Dark Lord had been incensed, and continued to take his anger out on his followers. That Snape's Dark Mark had been removed and that he had married and was happy caused the Dark Lord to be especially creative in his tormenting of the Death Eaters. No one was safe, as Lucius had found to his dismay.

Once Lucius had found out about what had taken place at the Halloween ball, he had insisted that Draco stand up for the Malfoy name and strike back at the woman who had caused his humiliation. And while that was all well and good for Lucius, Draco was unsure how to go about it. It wasn't as if he hadn't tried to stand up for himself, but the bitch refused to be cowed! How dare she challenge him? Didn't the woman know who he was? As Snape's wife, she should have been aware of the power of the Malfoy family!

"Draco?"

He whirled, wand out. Behind him stood Pansy Parkinson, dressed in a silver silk bathrobe, opened to reveal a deep green negligee with a plunging neckline.

Tucking his wand away, he turned back to the fire and relaxed. "What do you want, Pansy?"

"To talk to you, of course," she said, moving around to sit close to him. "You're obviously upset about something. Can I help?"

Leaning his head back against the couch, he closed his eyes. "I'm not in the mood, Pansy. Leave me."

She moved closer, brushed her breasts against his arm and placed her hand lightly on his chest. "Come on Draco. You know I care about you."

When he didn't answer, she rose to her knees, lifted one leg over both of his and sat on his lap, facing him. Bending down, she kissed him lightly on the neck. He shuddered and put his hands on her hips and she writhed against him suggestively. When his hands slid up to her breasts, she bit his ear gently before whispering, "That Snape woman has you upset, doesn't she, Draco?"

Shoving her off his lap, he turned to face her. "What would you know of it?"

"Draco, everyone knows of it," she said, sitting up again on the couch. "The Slytherin upper class was at the ball, if you'll remember. Most were more than happy to share your humiliation with the rest of our house. The other houses have been spreading the tale around the school like the mad. Surely you've heard the snickering?"

"No one would dare laugh at me," he said in a low growl, glaring at her.

"Not to your face, no. But they are laughing. They don't fear you any longer, Draco. Even the younger students..." She broke off at his dark look.

"That bitch," he ground out. "It's all her fault! Her husband should have warned her not to mess with the Malfoy family. Who does she think she is anyway?"

"An uppity mudblood, of course," Pansy said with a shrug.

"What?" Draco gasped in surprise. Leaping to his feet, he turned to face Pansy, furious.

"You didn't know? Oh yes, Professor Serena Snape is nothing more than a filthy mudblood. Now do you understand why people are laughing at you, Draco? First, Granger outwits you at every turn, and then a mudblood Professor insults you in front of the entire school." She sent him a calculating look before continuing with a dramatic sigh. "It's a shame, really. The son of one of the finest pureblood family's brought low by a mudblood. Again, I might add. How you can stand the humiliation..."

Draco slapped her with such force, her lip split. Tasting blood, she looked up at his looming form, incredulously.

Grabbing her wrist, Draco jerked her to her feet. "You'll learn your place, Pansy. As will our jumped up Potion's Mistress!"

When she tried to jerk her wrist from his grip, he tightened it until she gave a small cry of pain. "What will you do?" She asked quietly, lowering her eyes so he wouldn't see the lust in them.

"Lesson's must be taught. The traitor's wife will pay for what she's done. Your lesson however, begins tonight!"

Pushing her to the couch, he followed her down. Shoving a leg between hers, he pinned her to the couch with the weight of his body. As his hand slid between her thighs, she noticed the excited gleam in his eyes and smiled to herself. *This should be an enjoyable night* she thought, pleased with her manipulations.

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### **The DA, several days later...**

Harry and his group of friends watched from the sidelines. He had set up the Room of Requirement to simulate the town of Hogsmeade; right now the simulation had the town empty. From their vantage point, they were able to observe as Ron, Neville and Luna brought the squads into the town.

Once the exercise was complete, Harry called them all together and returned the room to a more normal setting. Ginny gave Harry a parchment that she had been using to take notes and comments from the others doing the exercise. Harry glanced quickly at the parchment before handing it to Ron. Then, he turned to the membership and started to speak.

“I want to say I’m really happy with how well everyone did with this. Especially since this is the first time we’ve had a chance to try this particular scenario. There were a few problems that Ron has and will speak to you about in a few minutes. But before I turn this over to him, I’d like to explain why we’re doing this.”

He paused and paced a few steps before continuing again.

“We’re in January now. In the simulation we just ran, we used the town of Hogsmeade. Sometime during the later part of May, we’ll be going in there for real...”

There was a sharp intake of breaths throughout the room.

“We have information that there will be an attack in that time frame, a bad attack and our help will be needed. The adults and the people fighting this war don’t know they need our help, and won’t know it until it’s too late. But I know they will need it. There are over 1,500 wizards, witches and children living in and around Hogsmeade. Most of who will die if we aren’t ready.”

He looked out at his classmates, his DA. They returned his look, determined to do their best. From the back of the crowd someone shouted, “We’ll be more than ready!” The crowd murmured its agreement.

Harry looked out over them and smiled broadly. “I know we’ll be ready because you guys are the best. Never forget that! Now, Ron here is going to point out some problem areas we still need to work on.”

Ron stepped up, referring to his parchment. “Second Squad, Susan you need to work on tightening up the interval between people....”

Harry tuned Ron out as he conferred with the others.

Later that evening, Harry lay awake in his bed. He was tired, but ideas kept whirling through his mind. He knew the upcoming battle was only the first major salvo in this war. It was too soon for him and Voldemort to meet.

In frustration, Harry threw on his robe and went down to the common room. He sat on the couch staring at the fire, annoyed that he was losing sleep again. He was about to walk back up to his

room to try again when his scar flared intensely. He had forgotten to put the salve on after his shower!

There was a noise in front of him. Painfully he opened one eye to see Dobby standing there, looking worried.

“Harry Potter! What is it! You is in great pain!”

“Nightstand... salve... get...”

Dobby’s eye’s widened and he nodded vigorously. He vanished with a pop and returned a moment later with the salve. He opened the small pot and Harry, lifting a trembling hand, dipped a finger into the crème and smeared it on his forehead. Harry’s muscles relaxed as the pain level immediately dropped to a point where it was barely noticeable.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he reached out and hugged the house elf in gratitude. “Dobby thanks! I forgot to put my salve on. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come along!”

Dobby’s eyes widened and he sniffed twice. “The great Harry Potter is thanking Dobby? Is you better now Harry Potter?”

“Yes Dobby. The salve that Mrs. Snape made for me makes the pain go away. That gives me an idea! Dobby, would you be willing to help me thank Professor Snape for making this for me?”

“Harry Potter asks Dobby for help? OF COURSE I WILL HELP THE GREAT HARRY POTTER!”

“Ok calm down Dobby, er... Dobby you can stop hugging my leg now... Here’s what we’ll do...”

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### **Three days later, Hogwarts Great Hall, breakfast...**

Professor Serena Snape took her customary seat next to her husband at the head table. She started to put food onto her plate when a bunch of flowers suddenly appeared on it. Pausing, she examined the flowers for a moment. Severus raised an eyebrow at her; she shook her head in bewilderment.

Severus leaned over and whispered in her ear, “Maybe one of the first years has a crush on you?” Serena smiled at that and told him if so, that would be sweet, but then he’d better worry about the competition.

With a loud pop, Dobby appeared between them. His tennis ball sized eyes brimmed with tears. “Professor Schnape! You is very great! You save the life of the great Harry Potter!”

Serena looked a bit taken aback by this. She had heard that Hogwarts had an insane house elf and she was worried what this strange elf was going to do.

“Dobby was instructed to give you this, and Dobby made these socks for you to thank you for saving the great Harry Potter!”

The little elf thrust a wrapped package into her hands and two glaringly mismatched socks, before disappearing with another loud pop.

Serena held up the two socks, one orange the other a bright blue. Throughout the great hall a series of giggles could be heard.

Dumbledore, watching the spectacle, said to Serena, “Dobby might have a color problem Serena, but his socks are quite warm. I highly recommend them.”

Placing the socks to one side she opened the package. Inside she found a book and a short note.

*Professor Snape,  
You have my everlasting thanks. Your salve DOES work as you thought it might. I forgot to put it on after my shower the other night. I had another attack, but Dobby brought me the salve and it made most of the pain go away. Please accept this book as a token of my thanks for your effort.  
Harry Potter*

*Now that was nice of him. He probably bought me a potion book that I already own, but that's ok,*  
She thought.

She looked at the volume. *Curious, there is no title on the cover?* She opened the book and gasped. *Advanced Potions and Potion Theory by Rowena Ravenclaw? It can't be, there are only four known copies of this book in the world, and it must be worth a small fortune!*

Her hands trembled as she examined the precious volume. Severus became alarmed at her reaction.

“Serena, what's wrong?”

She handed him the note, which he quickly read. Then, she showed him the title of the book. Severus paled and reached for the book, but she pulled it out of his reach and said, “You'll have to wait your turn Severus. Me first.”

Turning to look to the Gryffindor Table, she spotted Harry laughing with his friends. He looked in her direction and raised his cup to her in salute before turning back to his conversation.

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### **Shadows and light...**

Serena exited the library, annoyed. She'd been called there by Madam Pince to verify her permission to a seventh year student to access restricted material. It seems as though Irma Pince became more paranoid as the months passed. Written permission should have sufficed!

Walking rapidly down the dim hall, lost in her own thoughts, she didn't see the shadowy form following her.

Turning a corner to head for the stairs, she nearly collided with a group of students. Taking a step back, she frowned at her inattention.

And all hell broke loose.

“Look out!” Harry yelled and lunged at her, taking her to the ground hard.

One voice screamed “Diffindo!” just as Neville Longbottom yelled, “Protego Maxima!”

Whipping her head around, she saw Draco Malfoy’s curse hit Neville’s shield. And not just any shield. It stretched from wall to wall!

As Draco turned to run, Luna calmly leaned around Neville and cast the Impediment curse, freezing him in his tracks. She patted Neville’s arm and he released his shield.

Silence descended on the group. Serena looked at her unlikely saviors, wondering what would have happened had they not been there.

Ron Weasley glared furiously at Malfoy while his sister attempted to calm him. Neville looked shell-shocked. Luna Lovegood was still patting Neville’s arm and smiling vaguely at him. When Hermione Granger hissed something too low for Serena to hear, Neville and Luna both took their wands out, looking sheepish.

“Are you all right, Professor?” Harry asked, quietly.

Turning to the young man and noting his expression of concern, she nodded. When he stood and held out a hand to her, she took it.

Once on her feet, she told the group to stay put. Marching down the hall towards Draco Malfoy, her fury erupted. *That little shit! That spoiled little bastard!*

Reaching him, she took his wand from his frozen hand and broke it before his eyes. Releasing Luna’s curse, she grabbed Malfoy by the shoulder, spun him into the wall and pinned him there with a hand to his chest.

As she prepared to verbally eviscerate the young man, a voice spoke hesitantly from beside her.

“Professor?” Harry asked.

Turning, she looked into the young man’s distressed emerald gaze and ground her teeth. As much as she’d like to rip Malfoy apart, she couldn’t. Not here, at any rate.

“The Headmaster’s office,” she ground out.

Taking a calming breath, she continued. “Harry, go get my husband. Tell him what happened and bring him to the Headmaster’s office. The rest of us will meet you there. Since everyone here saw what happened, Dumbledore will undoubtedly wish to speak with us all.”

Harry nodded, turned and sprinted for the stairs. Serena grabbed a shocked Malfoy's arm and, herding the rest of the group off to Dumbledore, did her best to keep her anger in check.

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### **Dumbledore's office, Payment Due...**

As Severus and Harry entered the Headmaster's office through the fireplace, they found the room quite crowded. The six other students involved were seated. Professor Dumbledore sat behind his desk with Minerva McGonagall standing next to him. Flitwick sat beside the desk and followed Serena Snape's pacing form with concerned eyes.

The Head of Slytherin was furious. If what Harry told him was true, and he had no reason to doubt something so easy to verify, a student from his own house had attacked his wife. No, had tried to *kill* his wife! He knew Draco was mean and petty, but had always hoped the young man could be saved his father's path in life.

Once the roar of the fire died, Severus heard Serena's furious voice, all the more dangerous for its quiet intensity.

"I went along with the recommendations for not removing Mr. Malfoy as a prefect for his behavior at the Halloween ball, Headmaster. But this piece of shi...this waste of human...this *student*," she sneered, "has gone too far! He cast the severing hex...at my back! Such a brave little Slytherin snake, slinking in the shadows."

As Severus moved to her side, she whirled suddenly to face Malfoy. In a scathing tone, she asked, "Tell me, Mr. Malfoy, have you taken the Dark Mark yet? It would do your *Master* proud to know you enjoy crawling through the shadows to attack while an enemy's back is turned, you *fucking little bastard!*"

"Bastard?" Draco shrieked, jumping to his feet. "It figures a mudblood whore like you wouldn't recognize a pureblood!"

After a moment of shocked silence, the room erupted in chaos. Harry, Neville, Luna, Ron, Ginny and Hermione followed Draco to his feet, yelling their protests over his insult. McGonagall was yelling at the students to sit back down. Flitwick's high, squeaky voice could be heard pleading for calm.

When Serena reached out for a furious Malfoy, she was pushed away by her husband. Severus, all control gone, grabbed the young man by the neck and backed him into a wall.

"SILENCE!" Dumbledore's voice roared through the room.

As the noise ceased, Draco looked into the pitch black eyes of his Head of House and finally realized the magnitude of his mistake. *He's going to kill me. Right here in front of everyone!*

"Severus, release him," the Headmaster said, his voice cold.

When the DADA Professor didn't move, Fawkes crooned soothingly.

Snape released Malfoy with slow, jerky movements, almost as if he were fighting with himself. With one last furious look, he moved away from the young man and went to his wife.

“Filius, will you take Serena out into the hall, please?” Dumbledore asked. As the diminutive Charms Professor lead Professor Snape from the room, the Headmaster continued. “Draco, everyone, sit down.”

As everyone resumed their seats, Dumbledore eyed them all over the rim of his glasses, his expression grave. “Harry, why don’t you begin? Tell me what happened, please.” As the other students started to protest, he held up a hand to calm them. “I will be asking for statements from all of you, but we will do this in an orderly fashion. Begin, Mr. Potter.”

As Harry stood, Draco sunk a little further into his seat, thinking quickly. There had to be a way out of this. There just had to be! But as the interviews continued, after each student stood to give their account of tonight’s fiasco, he realized his time at Hogwarts might truly be over.

*My father will be furious! What was I thinking? I should have waited until the bitch was alone! But it was so perfect. Why did Potter and his gang of misfits have to show up then? Why? There’s no way out of this. Dumbledore, the old fool, will never forgive me for this. How can I...wait! He forgave that traitor, Snape, didn’t he? Maybe if I beg forgiveness. But Malfoy’s don’t beg! Would it be worth it? Think!*

Draco’s thoughts halted as Dumbledore thanked the students for their statements and dismissed them. As they filed out, each sent him a contemptuous glance. Turning his eyes to the Headmaster, he took a quick breath. It was time to save what he could.

Harry opened the office door and ushered the others out. Sending one last fleeting look to the Headmaster, he closed the door and turned to walk down the stairs, but was stopped by the form of Professor Snape.

“I wanted to thank you all. If it hadn’t been for you, I could very well be dead right now,” Serena told them. Reaching out, she laid a hand on Neville’s shoulder before continuing. “I’d also like to apologize for my behavior. No matter the provocation, I should not have lost my temper.”

After a few more moments of quiet conversation, the student’s turned to head down the stairs and back to their common rooms. Before Harry could descend the stairs however, she stopped him.

“I wanted to thank you Harry. Had it not been for you, I may have killed the slimy git without thinking.”

“That’s not true, Serena. You couldn’t kill anyone,” Flitwick squeaked behind her.

Ignoring him, she gazed into Harry’s eyes and saw the understanding in them as he whispered, “Don’t worry Professor. Everyone wants to kill Malfoy at one point or another.”

At her quiet laugh, Harry sent her a small, shy smile, and then bolted for the stairs.

Watching him leave, Serena heard the door behind her open and Minerva McGonagall’s stern voice asking her and Filius to come back in.



Upon entering the room, she went immediately to her husband. Severus took her hand and gazed into her eyes. Seeing his worry, she raised her other hand and brushed his cheek lightly. When Dumbledore started to speak, they both turned to face him.

“Having heard the statements from the other students involved, I now await your explanation, Mr. Malfoy.”

Looking at the floor, Draco began to speak. “I apologize for my actions, Sir. My father heard about the trouble I’d gotten into at Halloween and was furious. Not for what I did, but because I’d been caught and ‘humiliated’ in front of the school for it.”

Taking a deep breath and thinking that this had better work, he looked up at the Headmaster with tear filled, pleading eyes. “My father hates Professor Snape and refers to him as a traitor. Once it became clear that his Dark Mark had been removed, that he was married and happy, my father became enraged. He demanded that I prove my loyalty to the family and the Dark Lord, by hurting Professor Snape. He told me that if I wanted to return to my family...” Draco broke off and curled up on his chair, looking away from the Headmaster’s eyes.

“Continue, Mr. Malfoy,” Dumbledore said, softly.

Rubbing the tears from his face, Draco mumbled something under his breath before looking up once again.

“Sir, you know what my father is. You know what’s expected of me. Since the day I was old enough to understand, my father has insisted that I follow him and take the Dark Mark. But I don’t want it! He won’t listen when I try to tell him. He brushes it off as nerves. Nerves! But if I don’t take the Mark...if I don’t do as my father tells me...where will I go? If I hadn’t done as my father said, if I hadn’t stood up for the *Malfoy name*,” he sneered bitterly, “what then? I’m trapped, Sir and I have no way out!”

When he stopped talking, the room grew quiet. Finally, Dumbledore stood. Walking to Draco, he said, “I want you to wait outside, Mr. Malfoy. The Professors and I have much to discuss.”

As Dumbledore escorted him out to the hallway, Draco felt the thrill of success. This might just work after all. If nothing else, it couldn’t get any worse.

When Dumbledore returned and closed the door, he warded it against eavesdropping. Returning to his desk, he sat heavily for a moment. Finally looking up, he said quietly, “He’s lying.”

At the tired nods from those in the room, he sat back in his chair and sighed deeply. “The problem is what do we do about it?”

When Serena opened her mouth, Severus squeezed her hand in a silent bid for her to close it again. Shooting him glare, she remained quiet.

“We expel him, of course,” Severus said, angrily. “No matter his reasons, the boy tried to kill my wife!”

“And you would know nothing about bad choices and worse decisions would you Severus?” The Headmaster asked softly.

Seeing the younger man wince at such a well-aimed blow, Dumbledore removed his glasses and rubbed aching eyes. “Sit, all of you. We have much to discuss tonight.”

In the end, it was simple really. The young man was too valuable to throw away. He could be used, voluntarily or not, to gain information for their side. While many in the room were shocked by the Headmaster’s ruthlessness, one was not.

Severus had been on the receiving end of Dumbledore’s drive to win at any cost for more years than he cared to remember. A small part of him even felt sorry for the young Slytherin for what was about to come. However, another part, the larger part, still wanted to rip Draco apart and send him back to his father, postage due!

When the young man was let into the room once more, he quickly found out just how much worse things could get.

Once Draco was seated, the Headmaster spoke.

“Mr. Malfoy, it has been decided that you will not be expelled. I will escort you to Diagon Alley to replace your wand in the morning. However, you have been stripped of your Prefect-ship. You are also removed from the Quidditch team and will attend no extracurricular activities. No Hogsmeade visits, no dances, no walks by the lake. You are confined to the castle, unless escorted by a teacher. At the end of each day, your wand will be taken from you. It will be given back at the start of your first lesson every morning.”

At each new pronouncement, Draco slumped lower in his seat. His face was ashen and he gripped the arms of the chair tightly.

“In addition, every free hour you have, not spent on your studies or classes, you will be in detention with Mr. Filch. If Mr. Filch is unavailable or busy, you will spend your detentions with me. Do you understand everything I have told you, Mr. Malfoy?”

“Yes Sir,” Draco replied in a small, horror stricken voice.

“Excellent. On a final note, I would like to add that, had you come to me with this, I would have helped you, as would your Head of House. It is my hope that you will learn from your mistakes in time to turn away from the dangerous path you insist on walking.

Now, Professor McGonagall will escort you to your common room. I have more to discuss with your Head of House.”

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### **Slytherin common room, two days later...**

Once again, Draco sat before the fire in the common room. The room was quickly emptying of students, but he didn’t notice. The true horror of his actions, and Dumbledore’s punishment, had sunk in at last.

But for Draco Malfoy, the lessons weren't over yet. He never noticed the large group of students approaching him.

When his head was suddenly yanked back by his hair, his arms pinned down and his legs jerked out, a new horror was introduced.

Shoving a gag into his mouth, Blaise Zabini hissed in his ear, "And now you learn what your little stunt cost you. Not all Slytherins are Voldemort's lap dogs!"

When the first punch landed, Blaise continued. "Don't worry Draco. We're not going to kill you. Will leave that to your father and your '*Dark Lord*,'" he sneered.

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### **Pain (The next day)...**

Harry came down to the common room where he found Hermione waiting for Ron. Looking at Hermione quizzically, he asked her where Ginny was.

She looked embarrassed for a moment then said, "Well if you must know, she forgot to take her cramp potion last night. She'll be down in 10 minutes or so, that's how long it takes to work. She said to start your run and she'll catch up to you."

Harry cringed and blushed at the mention of the 'cramp potion'.

"Tell her I've gone on ahead and I'll meet her out on our run or at breakfast if she doesn't make the run."

Harry left the castle and headed to the lake. Every morning, he ran five laps around the lake. He preferred to get up and run a little earlier than the rest of the DA members. He was usually half way through his run when the rest joined him.

Harry reached the lake and started his stretching exercises. This was a good time for him. The lake was usually quiet and peaceful; it was almost meditative in its calmness. Occasionally, the lake would ripple as the Giant Squid moved beneath the surface, chasing a merman. A few minutes later, he began his run.

It didn't take long for the rhythmic motions of running to become automatic, allowing him to order his thoughts for the coming day and to review the events of the previous one. His body followed the path beaten by the physical fitness club and DA members. He ran on, not really paying attention to the scenery around him.

He was coming around to the spot closest to Hogsmeade. The train station was only about 500 meters away and he was roughly half way around the lake. His pace was steady, not a flat out run, just a comfortable jog, his breathing deep and even.

Taking the slight curve of the trail that signaled the return leg to Hogwarts, Harry suddenly felt a searing pain to the back of his head and his glasses flew off his face. His vision flared with bright spots and he fell face down into the hard packed dirt. Dizzily, he rolled over to see a blurry shape

looming over him. The figure swung something again and Harry's arm exploded in pain as the object hit him.

Dimly, he heard, "I'VE GOT YOU NOW BOY!"

His mind froze and he whispered, "Uncle Vernon?"

The figure swung again and the world went dark for Harry Potter.

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### **Ginny...**

Ginny hurried out of the school and down to the lake. She decided that she could be running while waiting for the potion to take effect. Harry was only a few minutes ahead of her, so maybe she could catch up with him.

She was coming up to the halfway point of her run when she spotted something shiny lying in the grass. Curious, she stopped and walked over to see what it was.

*Harry's glasses*, she thought, bending over to pick them up.

She looked around worriedly. She walked back to the path and looked around again. A few feet further up the path she saw blood...too much blood.

Ginny gave her phoenix ring a twist, signaling to the others an emergency. Pulling her wand, she followed the trail of blood cautiously. Everything in her screamed *run, find him, NOW!* But she wasn't sure what she was dealing with yet.

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### **Back at Hogwarts...**

Students from three different houses boiled out of their common rooms, racing for the great entrance. Some of them were still in their pajamas. Ron shouted for several of them to get their brooms. Teachers, spotting the mass of partially clad students, shouted at them to stop, even threatened to take house points, but they were ignored.

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### **Discoveries...**

Ginny followed the blood trail; it was obvious to her that someone had been dragged this way. She didn't have to go far, the trail ended by a clearing with a single tree in it. Ginny stopped momentarily, shocked at the sight before her.

*Harry? HARRY!*

His arms were tied together at the wrists and he was hanging with his feet dangling off the ground. The other end of the rope was tied off to the tree. His clothing was torn and bloody and there appeared to be a huge gash in his side. A large man stood in front of him, talking in a low

muttering voice. Then he reared back and hit Harry a club. There was a sickening crack and Harry's leg dangled at an odd angle. Harry moaned; he was barely conscious at this point.

Ginny shook off her shock and exploded out into the clearing. She hit Vernon with a bludgeoning spell, and then hit him with a couple of Stupefies before using an Incarcerous spell, binding him tightly in rope.

Rushing up to Harry, she was horrified. He was a mass of bruises; several of his limbs were obviously broken. She wasn't sure what to do; he was hurt in so many places! She was afraid to levitate him down. Frightened, she pointed her wand skyward and began to shoot off volleys of small fireballs to guide in the others.

She extended an arm to Harry, but was afraid to touch him.

Suddenly she heard a voice shouting her name. She looked about wildly, and then spotted Ron and Hermione on his broom. Hermione had her eyes squeezed tightly shut. She hated flying. Ginny waved them down. Ron brought his broom to a neat landing in front of Ginny; he still hadn't spotted Harry.

"Ginny what's... OH, BLOODY MERLIN!"

Hermione turned to look, and her face paled. "Ron, we need to get him down, now!"

Ron yelled at Justin Finch Fletchly to land and help him. Neville had already landed with Luna. Both of them looked ashen.

Ginny turned to Luna. "Luna, get back to school. Tell them we have a medical emergency coming in and we need Auror support now. MOVE!"

Luna nodded once and, hopping on her broom, sped away.

Hermione levitated Harry while Ron cut the rope. Ginny conjured a stretcher to place Harry on, before joining Neville on his broom. Hermione climbed on behind Ron. Levitating the stretcher between the two brooms, they slowly took off.

Justin looked over at the unconscious Vernon and levitated him. Climbing back onto his broom, he towed vile fat man back to the castle, not bothering to check if he had enough altitude on the levitation spell. The man had obviously just beaten a student. Did it really matter if he hit a few trees along the trip?

Madam Pomfrey, Professors McGonagall, Dumbledore and both Snapes were all standing at the entrance to the school when they spotted the strange formation of brooms and people. Alerted by the strange behavior of the students this morning, and then Luna's warning, the adults waited breathlessly to see whom, and exactly how bad, it was.

DA Members saw the brooms coming in. Someone barked an order and the group formed a hasty perimeter about 100 yards deep, wands at the ready. Two of the members waved for the brooms to land in the open area in front of the entrance to the school.

The formation moved slowly, clearly overloaded between the two people per broom and the burden held between them. Coming up behind them was a single rider on a broom, with an object in tow.

Landing in front of the Professors, the four dismounted. Serena and Minerva paled and gasped.

Ron controlled the levitation on the stretcher. Once it reached the ground, Madam Pomfrey, shoving students out of her way in her rush, moved to Harry's side.

After running several diagnostic spells, she turned to the Headmaster, saying, "Albus, I'm going to need the best trauma healer St. Mungos can provide. He's too badly injured to move that far. We need to move quickly and I can't heal this much damage on my own. I'll exhaust myself before I can finish."

Turning to a horror stricken Ron, she ordered him to follow her to the infirmary with the stretcher. Serena followed them as Dumbledore turned back to the rest of the students. Noticing for the first time the second incoming broom, he looked at the burden Justin was towing and moved closer.

Seeing the body of Mr. Dursley, he raised an eyebrow. "This explains much," he murmured.

McGonagall put her hand on Dumbledore's arm. "Albus do you know this man?" She asked, pointing at the still unconscious figure.

"Alas I'm afraid I do. That is Harry's Uncle Vernon."

McGonagall actually let some of her animagus break through her control. She stepped back and hissed at the form on the ground.

Ginny choked back her tears and said in a trembling voice. "I found his glasses, then a trail of blood. He had tied Harry to a tree and was beating him with a tree limb when I found him. Never in my whole life did I ever want to use an unforgivable, but today I wanted to cast one."

Professor McGonagall placed an arm around Ginny. "Come Miss Weasley. Let us find someplace where we can talk. I'm sure there will be people who will want to talk to you later."

Only Severus noted the DA members breaking off from their perimeter and returning back to the school.

Dumbledore spoke softly, but there was a hint of iron in his voice. "Severus, shortly there will be Aurors arriving. Will you stay with this man until they can take charge of him? I must get up to the infirmary."

Professor Snape could only nod as a slow anger burned within him while he stared at the bound figure.

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## Hogwarts Infirmary...

Albus Dumbledore walked into the infirmary in time to spot a man appear. He was obviously the St. Mungos healer, using their prearranged portkey. The healer quickly pulled a box out of his pocket and expanded it rapidly.

Dumbledore stood with a slowly growing group of people watching this macabre spectacle unfolding before them all. Ron looked grim as he gripped Hermione's hand tightly. Hermione could only stare at the two healers and the limp figure on the bed.

Serena was in the small infirmary potion lab getting blood replenishing potions and strengthening potions ready.

Harry lay on an infirmary bed, bleeding from more than a dozen places. As Poppy tried to figure out where to even begin, the man stepped up to her and said, "I'm healer Basil Askerton from St. Mungos. Where do you want me to start?"

Poppy nodded and said, "I'm still trying to stabilize and assess his injuries. Start at his feet and help me stabilize him first. Then we can go back and deal with the lesser injuries."

Long minutes ticked away like an eternity. The infirmary door opened, admitting Molly and Ginny, along with Professor McGonagall. Not long after they arrived, Remus and Tonks entered, followed by Severus Snape and Auror William Hill, Harry's caseworker.

Ginny turned to Molly, who wrapped her arms around her, holding her tightly. Molly's eyes never left the still form lying on the bed. Tonks spoke to Auror Hill in a hushed tone, her hair wildly fluctuating in color and length.

Remus looked ready to collapse as he gazed at the mangled, still form of the boy who was so like a son to him. *Who would do such a thing? Why can't he just be a normal kid? Gods, why can't you just leave him alone for fucks sake*, he raged silently.

The group watched the two healers as they spoke in hushed tones. Spells flashed and wands glowed as they tried to repair the damage. So busy were the two healers, they completely forgot to put up the curtains around the bed.

"Arrhythmia!" Poppy snapped, as Harry's heartbeat wavered.

Askerton pulled a bottle from the box on the table and quickly filled a syringe.

Seeing that he was ready, Poppy pointed her wand at Harry's chest. "Physiologus Phasmatis," she intoned.

As Harry's chest became translucent, Askerton leaned over him and injected the potion directly into his faltering heart.

In a flash of flame, Fawkes appeared in the large room. He circled it, singing a soothing note, his eyes ever on the healers as they worked.

“Ok it’s steadying up now.” Poppy said, as she sent a glance of gratitude to the phoenix circling the room.

The two healers continued working on Harry. Finally, Askerton sat heavily on a nearby bed, his head bowed. Poppy walked wearily over to the group that had been watching. Fawkes vanished in another flash of flame.

Dumbledore spoke first.

“Poppy... is he?” The dreadful word left unsaid.

“No Headmaster, he’s out of danger. But there is still so much damage to heal. I’ve counted more than thirty broken bones alone. Healer Askerton and I have to rest a bit before we can continue. It took both of us and much of our magic to stabilize him.”

“Would more healers help, Madam Pomfrey?” Auror Hill asked.

“Aye, another healer or two would be a big help. That way Healer Askerton and I can rotate with them. You folks might as well go get some rest. Even with more healers, it may not be until tomorrow before he wakes.”

Dumbledore looked around at the people standing around them, and suggested they all go to his office where Auror Hill could make the arrangements for additional healers. It was a much-subdued group when they left the infirmary.

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## **LATER...**

Harry was confused. He wasn’t sure where he was, or why. He heard voices. He pried one eye open and tried looking around. He couldn’t move his neck very well; it was so hard to move! He spotted several fuzzy shapes nearby; a cool cloth was placed against his forehead. He heard a voice he didn’t recognize, it sounded like it came from a great distance and he couldn’t quite make it out. A potion was placed to his lips and he swallowed instinctually.

The voice spoke, clearly this time. “Sleep Harry, that’s what you need now.”

He felt a hand gently rub his cheek as he drifted off...

Harry blinked a few times before opening his eyes fully. The infirmary again! He sighed.

He felt so tired still but he couldn’t sleep anymore. He tried lifting his arm up to reach for his glasses, but he only got it half way before his strength gave out on him. His arm dropped limply, bushing against one of the blurry forms near his bed. The figure turned and he heard a strange voice.

“Harry? How do you feel?”

“Hurts... Glasses...” he mumbled.



The blur moved to the night table, picked up an object, then leaned over him and placed his glasses on his face. The world swam into focus. Harry peered up at the strange man with the soothing voice. "Who... what..."

"I'm Basil Askerton, a healer from St. Mungos. Madam Pomfrey called me in to help. As to how you got here, you were attacked. But I don't want you to worry about that now. There are quite a few people that are hoping to see you. I'll let you see two people at a time, but only for a short while. Madam Pomfrey asked that I wake her when you finally woke up. I want you to rest Harry. You're going to be very weak and sore for quite a while. Only time and sleep will fix that."

Healer Askerton pulled one curtain aside and stepped outside. Harry could hear voices murmuring from beyond the curtain. Harry watched as the shadows cast by the torchlight danced crazily against the screen.

Molly and Arthur stepped in from behind the curtain. Ginny snuck in behind them. Glancing over her shoulder, Molly glared at her daughter who stared back defiantly.

Ginny took one chair beside Harry's bed while Molly took the other. Arthur stood at the foot of the bed. Harry tried to lift his hand to take Ginny's, but he didn't have the strength yet. Ginny took his hand in hers, not saying anything as she tried to control her emotions.

Molly leaned over him, kissed him on the cheek, and then asked in a soft voice, "How are you feeling love?"

He gave her a weak smile, replying, "I guess I'm better than I was, but it still hurts some and I can't seem to stay awake for long."

"Healer Askerton says you're making good progress Harry."

"I guess I must have been bad off to need two healers..."

Arthur and Molly exchanged a look. They weren't going to tell him he had actually needed four healers yet.

"Well, right now you just concentrate on getting better Harry," Arthur said. "We've fixed up your room at home and we're back in the Burrow again, thanks to you and Remus. When school ends, you'll be able to come home."

Harry smiled at the thought of that. Home sounded so good to him right about now.

Molly and Arthur chatted with him for a few minutes more then Molly glanced at her daughter. The two exchanged a look and Molly ushered Arthur out. Harry turned to Ginny, uncertain. She had been so quiet all this time, just holding his hand.

"Gin?"

She moved over to sit on the side of the bed, releasing Harry's hand. Stroking his cheek, she whispered softly, "Harry, I was so frightened I thought I had lost you..." She tried to stifle a sob, but couldn't.

Harry tried to sit up and take her into his arms, but he lacked the strength. He growled in frustration and exhaustion before dropping back to the bed. Ginny leaned cautiously against him, careful not to put any weight on him.

Tiredly, he whispered, "It's alright Gin, I'm still here."

She kissed him gently on the lips then sat up just before the two healers returned. Resuming her seat, she recaptured his hand in hers.

Madam Pomfrey ran a few diagnostics before speaking to Harry. Her normally abrupt tone replaced in favor of a much softer one this time.

"Well Mr. Potter, I see you've decided to rejoin us. You do seem to be doing better. You and I are going to have plenty of time together, as I'm afraid you will be here for a while longer. There are still a lot of people waiting to see you, but I'm afraid you've exhausted yourself at this point. You'll be able to see them in the morning. Miss Weasley, I'll allow you to stay with him until he falls asleep, but then you must return to your house until tomorrow."

Ginny gave Madam Pomfrey a pleading look and she sighed, then handed Ginny the sleeping draught. She stood there watching while Ginny helped Harry drink the potion, and then accepted the empty bottle from her with a smile. The two healers left them alone, going out to shoo away the visitors until tomorrow.

Harry smiled up at Ginny, his eyes getting heavier by the minute. She smoothed away the hair from his forehead as his eyes closed. Harry fell asleep with the image of the prettiest witch in the world in his eyes.

Ginny reach over and carefully removed his glasses, placing them on the night table. Before she left his bed, she paused and looked at him again long enough to whisper, "Your mine, Harry Potter."

When Harry awoke he was momentarily blinded. The curtains had been taken away during the night and the sunlight was streaming into the infirmary. Dumbledore sat next to his bed, sampling from a box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. He chewed a bean for a moment before turning to Harry.

"Ah Harry, I'm glad to see you're feeling better..."

Harry tried to sit up, but he couldn't. Madam Pomfrey came over to help him up. While she held him, she conjured several pillows behind him. Harry was trembling with fatigue when she lowered him back down.

"Sorry, Professor."

"No need Harry. You've been through a bad experience and it's understandable. I wanted to talk to you before everyone else, however. In a short while, Auror William Hill will come in and ask to take a statement from you. Tell him what you can remember. He may ask for you to put your memories in a Pensieve, but I doubt it. Between Miss Weasley's statements and your attackers, I

dare say you will not have to worry about testifying. Auror Hill will try to make this easier for you, but its necessary Harry...”

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry’s shoulder kindly, and peered over his half moon glasses at him.

“You understand Harry, that we need to follow the letter of the law here?”

“Yes sir, I understand.”

“Very well then. Now, how are you really feeling Harry?”

“Really feeling? Well Sir, I still feel like I’ve been hit with a dozen bludgers and I can’t seem to do anything for myself without getting exhausted.”

Dumbledore smiled at that, and then pointed to the mound of cards and candy that were overflowing his nightstand. “Your admirers have sent their well wishes, and I am truly happy to see you better. You have other visitors waiting at this point, so I’ll send Auror Hill in and let you get that out of the way first.”

Dumbledore stood up and left the infirmary. In a few moments, Auror William Hill walked in. When he spotted Harry, he smiled.

Walking over to Harry’s bed, he pulled out a piece of parchment and an enchanted quill. Madam Pomfrey stood in the doorway of her office and watched carefully. She was ready to step in at the first sign that her patient was experiencing any distress.

“Harry, I’m going to try to make this as easy as possible on you. But some of these questions might be uncomfortable... Take your time answering them. Ok?”

Harry nodded.

“All right, let’s begin...” The quill lifted up, poised to write.

“What do you remember from the attack, Harry?”

“Well... I was doing my early morning run. I was just coming around the halfway point when I was hit from behind. I lost my glasses at that point. I remember a voice screaming at me, and then he hit me again...”

“Do you remember what the voice said, Harry?”

Harry gulped nervously and nodded his head in affirmative. He stared down at the bed, his complexion ashen, as tremors racked his body.

Auror Hill took in the boy’s reaction and ended the interview then and there. He had the testimony of the others involved. Harry’s statements would have been additional evidence to support the case, but it wasn’t really needed.

Hill placed a hand on Harry's leg and grimaced as the boy flinched away from the touch.

"I think I've got enough information, Harry. Why don't we stop there, hmm?"

After moving away from the bed, Hill asked Madam Pomfrey for a moment of her time.

Once in Poppy's office, Hill turned to her and said seriously, "Healer Pomfrey, I've seen this sort of thing enough times to recognize the signs. Not today, maybe even not this week, but sooner or later Harry's going to have an emotional crisis over this. I terminated my interview early because I saw I was coming close to triggering it right now and he's not strong enough for it to happen yet. I'd suggest a calming draught for now, and keeping a close eye on him. I don't think Harry will open up to a mind healer, so you'll have to warn his family and friends about it."

Poppy nodded. She had plenty of experience with bludger injuries, the odd misplaced limb, or misfired charm, but this was a little out of her league. After the Auror left, she gave Harry a calming draught.

Over the next week, Harry had many visitors. Friends, family and faculty all dropped in to talk and check on his progress. Remus and Tonks visited several times and Molly was there nearly everyday, sometimes with Arthur and sometimes alone.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny brought him his homework and helped him with what he was missing. When Harry nodded off from exhaustion, they'd sit quietly, talking in hushed tones and doing their own homework.

Harry continued to improve, although he was still weak. Eventually, he was able to get out of bed and wander around the infirmary. He took to sitting with Madam Pomfrey in her office, sometimes even having a meal in there. He liked the healer. She put up a gruff exterior, but Harry knew she really cared for her charges.

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### **Hogwarts Infirmary, very early February...**

Harry had been in the infirmary nearly nine days when he woke from an afternoon nap to discover Dumbledore sitting in a chair next to his bed. Dumbledore smiled at him, but his tone was serious.

"Harry, Madam Pomfrey is willing to release you in time for you to go to dinner with your classmates this evening. But she insists you take it very easy for at least another week. And that means no extra training Harry." Dumbledore waited for an acknowledgement of that requirement before continuing.

"I've asked Miss Weasley to make sure you take your potions, and your friends are waiting outside to walk you to the Great Hall. I'll give you a few minutes to dress before sending them in."

"Yes Sir. Thank you sir!"

He had just finished dressing when the door burst open and Ron, Hermione and Ginny came barreling at him. Leaving the infirmary, he felt like he was free and he wanted to shout for joy. Unfortunately, the feeling didn't last long. By the time he got to the Great Hall, he felt like he had walked miles. He was ever so grateful when he was finally able to sit.

Harry was surprised by how many people came up to welcome him back. It was rather embarrassing for him, really. Fortunately, people scrambled back to their seats as the meal appeared. He had just started loading up his plate when Ginny stopped him. From a small case, she started pulling out several vials of potions, placing them down in front of him. He gave her a pleading look. She gave him an expression he had only previously on Molly. It was a look that said, 'YOU WILL DO THIS!'

Harry glanced to Ron and Hermione, but found no support there. Ron was enjoying this too much and Hermione's expression echoed Ginny's. Sighing in surrender, Harry started drinking his potions while Ginny filled his plate with food, a smug grin on her face.

By the time dinner was done, Harry was leaning dangerously to one side, nearly falling on top of Ginny. Ron signaled to Neville and the two of them helped Harry to his feet. He was nearly asleep before they left the Great Hall. Ginny, Hermione and Luna followed the two boys carrying Harry up to his bed.

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### **Ministry of Magic, Wizengamot, two days later...**

A bailiff barked as the judges re-entered the chamber, "The prisoner will rise!"

Vernon Dursley took to his feet, shaking the chains he was wearing. He shouted, "You freaks can't do this! I demand to be taken before the Queens court! You weirdoes have no authority over me!"

The bailiff cast a silencing charm over the chained prisoner.

The chief Magistrate read from his parchment. "Vernon Dursley, you stand convicted of escape from Azkaban and the attempted murder of an underage wizard under the protection of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

You also stand convicted of being in league with the Dark Lord, as no wizard or witch other than those of the Dark Lord would have allowed you to get to Hogwarts. For these crimes you are condemned to the Veil of Death.

Having found you guilty on all charges, this court charges the bailiffs to proceed with executing the sentence forthwith! This court is adjourned."

Two bailiffs dragged the struggling prisoner from the room.

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## Chapter 11 Voldemort's Valentine

### Harry the heartthrob...

The next few days for Harry were some of the most trying in his life. He continued to regain his strength, but occasionally it would all catch up with him and he find himself suddenly dozing, at meals, in class. Most of his friends, and his teachers for that matter, knew what was going on and did what they could to help him. But the simple fact was, Harry was getting frustrated. The Valentine's Ball was only five days away and he wanted to take Ginny. The problem was, he was worried he'd collapse in a chair and fall asleep on her during the dance.

Ginny continued to make Harry take his potions. Fortunately, he was done with most of them; he was down to just a strengthening potion, which he hated, that he took three times a day. He actually took Ginny's role pretty well. He was fairly sloppy when it came to remembering to take his potions. He was honest enough to admit to himself that he liked her taking care of him, even if it did mean drinking something vile.

Ginny was sitting on her bed, writing, just before supper. It was only five days 'til the ball, and Harry was getting much better. *The ball probably won't be a problem for us, she thought, so long as we don't try to dance every dance. I know Harry's worried about it, but I'll make sure I don't tire him out.*

Ginny looked up at noise coming from the end of her bed.

"Ginny?"

It was Lavender Brown. Behind her stood a cluster of Gryffindor girls, ranging from second years, all the way up to seventh years. Hermione stood next to Lavender, a pained look on her face.

"What is it? What's gone wrong now?"

Lavender shoved a magazine under her nose. Ginny took the magazine from Lavender and scanned it, scowling.

It was Teen Witch Weekly's annual list of the most eligible bachelor wizards in the country. Flipping open the magazine, she turned to the relevant page and groaned. Harry had been listed down at the bottom of that list for the past year, but with him coming of age this year, the editors had decided to move him up. TO THE SECOND MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELOR! (Gilderoy Lockheart was still number one, despite being confined to the psyche ward at St. Mungos.) The caption under the photo read.

*This year, the Boy-Who-Lived comes of age. Listed as one of the wealthiest wizards in the country, with an estimated wealth in excess of 100 million galleons, Harry Potter is currently attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This handsome, green-eyed hunk will reach his maturity this summer. According to our sources, Mr. Potter is athletic; he enjoys early morning jogging and playing Quidditch with his friends. He played on his house team as Seeker his first year through his third year, helping them to win the House Cup. Sources describe him as artistically talented, quiet, and almost painfully shy with people he doesn't know. This bachelor is ripe for the plucking ladies. Excellent husband material for the lucky witch! Go get him girls!*

Ginny groaned and dropped the magazine. The Gryffindor girls all knew about her promise ring and how the couple felt for each other. But Ginny hadn't run around showing the ring to people and bragging about it. Few outside Gryffindor knew, and there were a number of girls in the school that considered a promise ring to mean nothing. To them, it was merely a token of friendship.

Ginny glanced at Hermione and asked her, "Where's Harry? He has no idea what's about to hit him."

"He and Ron left for dinner a few minutes ago..."

Ginny gasped.

Suddenly Lavender clapped her hands to get everyone's attention.

"Ladies! Our sister here needs our help!"

Ginny looked up gratefully. As a group, nearly fifty Gryffindor girls went to dinner.

Upon reaching the Great Hall, Ginny could see Harry and Ron sitting at the table. Ron looked confused, while Harry seemed to be trying to hide under the table. More than a dozen girls, all of them trying to talk to him or offer him something to eat, surrounded him. Many other girls sat at their tables giving Harry a hungry looks. Most of the teachers watched with amusement as the spectacle unfolded before them

The Gryffindor girls formed up around Ginny. Like an avalanche, the formation descended down the aisle of the Gryffindor table and collided with the pack of predatory females, sending them scattering.

Ginny looked down at Harry. At first, she thought she would be angry with him, but he actually looked relieved to see her. Laughing inwardly she thought, *He's not afraid to take on dragons, he'll offer his life to protect a child, but he's actually afraid of other girls. Merlin, he's so clueless!*

She reached down and grabbed his hand, pulling him to his feet. Harry still didn't have a clue what was going on, but he relaxed a little now that Ginny was there. Lavender shouted a command to the group.

"Ladies, to the front!"

With Ginny leading a bewildered Harry, the group of girls marched up to the head table and formed a solid line. Ginny and Harry stepped out in front of that line. Harry still didn't know what was going on. Dumbledore sat back in his chair holding his goblet and smiling. His eyes were twinkling with amusement.

Conversations in the Great Hall hushed, as all eyes turned to watch. Ginny, still holding Harry's hand, spoke in a loud voice. "Ladies of Hogwarts..." She thrust up the hand with her softly pulsating ring for all to see. She paused as several girls in their seats spotted the ring. Several gasped, a few looked furious; many looked at the ring with a sigh of longing, one girl fainted!

“This says he’s mine... and so does this!”

Ginny turned to Harry and kissed him, not a gentle sweet kiss, but one designed to set Harry on fire. Harry, caught off guard, stiffened for a moment. He still wasn’t sure what was going on, but if his Ginny wanted to kiss him, that was fine by him. He returned her kiss, giving her as well as he got. The boys at the Gryffindor table erupted in wolf howls and whistles.

When they finally broke their kiss, Harry was breathing heavily and Ginny looked flushed. Ginny finally regained some measure of composure and turned back to the on-looking student body.

“Back off girls, this man is taken!” She said in a steely tone that brooked no argument.

Ginny led a stunned Harry back to his seat. She ignored the icy stares some of the other girls were giving her. She had made her point. She had laid her claim, proven it, and then, in that secret witch talk no wizard could ever understand, made it clear that she’d fight to defend her property. The rest of the Gryffindor girls followed Harry and Ginny back to the table. By standing up there with her, they also said they would stand with Ginny if she needed it.

Once back at their table, Harry turned to look at Ginny, saying, “Gin, umm... are you going to explain what just happened?”

Ginny touched his cheek fondly, but said, “Harry, I love you dearly, you’re incredibly smart when you want to be, you’re brave, you’re an incredible wizard, but there are some things you’ll never understand and this is one of them.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at that. Had he just been gently insulted? Why were women so hard to understand? He shook his head in wonder and, turning to fill his plate, was dismayed to find yet another potion vial before him. The damn things tasted so bad and made everything he ate afterwards taste horrible.

Ginny gave him that look. Shrugging in surrender, he reached for the potion while Ginny filled his plate for him.

Near the end of the meal Harry borrowed Hermione’s copy of the Daily Prophet. Scanning over the front page he moved on to the Quidditch scores, the Chudley Canons were still losing he saw. After that he idly flipped through the paper, reading whatever caught his interest. Something snagged his eye; he froze, then he paled. He dropped the paper on the table.

Harry stood up quickly, his movements slightly jerky. His three friends turned to look up him inquisitively. He mumbled, “I’ve got to go” and walked out of Great Hall.

Hermione glanced over to a worried Ginny. “What do you suppose that was all about?”

“I don’t know, ‘Mione. He seemed fine until a minute ago.”

Ron spoke up, “He was fine. He was just reading the paper.”

Hermione mused, “Maybe he read something in the paper?”



Ginny pulled the paper to her and started to read the open pages aloud. “Hmmm... An article about a new cauldron shop opening on Diagon Alley, some advertisements, legal notices? I don’t see anything here ‘Mione.”

“Check the legal notices again Ginny. They use really small print.” Hermione suggested.

Ginny looked at the notices more carefully this time. Gasping suddenly, she held the paper out to Hermione with trembling hands.

Hermione took the paper and, finding the correct spot, read aloud in a small voice.

*“The Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, announced that last week, as ordered by the Wizengamot, it carried out the legal execution of Vernon C. Dursley, muggle. Dursley was an escaped convict from Azkaban. A convicted child abuser, he was apprehended after a vicious assault on an underage wizard at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Dursley was retried and convicted of assault with intent to kill, and of being in league with Dark Wizards. Dursley was sent through the veil last week leaving no surviving kin that we are aware of...”*

“Oh Harry,” Hermione breathed.

“Ron, we need to find Harry. Go check the dorm. If he’s not there, check the Quidditch pitch and the surrounding areas. Ginny and I will check the castle.”

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### **Harry’s breakdown...**

Harry stood in the living room of #4 Privet Drive. His breath came in shuddering gasps, his eyes unseeing. In his mind he could see them all, he could see the big meaty fist of Uncle Vernon hitting him, the bony thin foot of Aunt Petunia kicking him, Dudley and his goons pinning him to that wall in the alley behind the school and beating him.

The rage, which built up in him, had nothing to do with magic. It was pure, primal, it was the beast contained within us all. Harry howled in fury and started throwing the furniture about. He was screaming. He couldn’t control it. He didn’t even understand it.

He pounded his fists against a wall, shattering plaster and cutting his hands. He flipped over the couch, then grabbed Petunia’s rocker and hurled it through the window screaming, “YOU FUCKING BASTARDS! HOW COULD YOU DO THAT TO ME!”

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### **Intervention and help...**

Ginny and Hermione had checked several places where Harry was known to go when he wanted some solitude, before trying the Room of Requirement. They paused outside the door, looking at each other in concern. They could clearly hear the sounds of yelling and crashing from within the room

“Mione, I’ll go in. I don’t think he’s going to want a big crowd. Go alert the DA members that tonight’s meeting is cancelled, then see if you can get a calming draught out of Madam Pomfrey without her causing too much fuss.”

Hermione nodded, saying, “If necessary, I’ll make it myself. I’ll tell Ron to steer clear of the room. I don’t think he’d mind you or me there. But Ron would make him really clam up and we don’t want that.”

Ginny thought that was a good idea. She started to turn to go into the room when Hermione placed a hand on her arm. The two girls looked at each other for a moment before going in different directions.

Ginny opened the door to the Room of Requirement and slipped quietly inside. She didn’t recognize what she saw. The place was a wreck. It looked like it had been a typical muggle house. But furniture was overturned, broken. Someone had thrown a rocking chair through the window. Suddenly, there was a crashing sound from another room and she could hear Harry yelling.

“I DID EVERYTHING FOR YOU BASTARDS! I COOKED! I CLEANED! I PICKED UP AFTER YOU! WHY? WHY? WHY! I DIDN’T ASK FOR MUCH!”

Harry stormed back into the living room, his eyes not even noticing Ginny standing there.

“GOD DAMN YOU DURSLEYS MAY YOU ROT IN HELL!” He howled.

Ginny gasped as Harry plunged his fist into the wall over the fireplace, breaking through the plaster. Harry withdrew his bloody fist and stood there for a moment, his chest heaving in shuddering gasps. His hands were bloody, the stains making designs on Petunia’s white carpet.

“WHY YOU BLOODY BASTARDS?”

That final yell seemed to pull all of the fight out of him. He pitched to his knees and began to cry. This was what Madam Pomfrey had warned them about. Ginny approached Harry slowly, she knew he had to cry this out, he couldn’t keep suppressing it, but this was a dangerous time for him. Pressed too hard, Harry would fight it all back down, only to have it explode again more violently than before.

Harry was kneeling on the floor. His were shoulders heaving uncontrollably. Ginny knelt in front of him, she wanted to touch him, but she didn’t. She had to wait for him to see her. Her heart ached to see him like this, so vulnerable; lost within the pain his own memories were causing him. She ached for him, how could he stand this? How could anyone stand it?

Harry slowly looked over at her, his eyes filled with a terrible pain. She returned his look, trying not to let the anguish she felt at this point show on her face. He collapsed against her, his head on her shoulders. Still crying, he tried gasping out the questions that had haunted him for years.

“Why... why couldn’t they... love me even... just a little? What did I do wrong? Am I a freak, a bad person? What is wrong with me?”

Ginny tightened her grip on him. Her own tears starting. "Let it out Harry... you have to let it out," she said softly.

Harry held her like he was afraid she'd vanish if he let go and he cried.

It was the cry of a three year old sitting in a dark cupboard with no one to chase back his fear of the dark.

It was the cry of a five year old getting beaten because he asked for a birthday present.

It was the cry of a lonely nine year old, sitting in a sweltering cupboard in the middle of the summer, locked in there for nearly a week.

It was the cry of a fifteen year old, learning that he had to kill or be killed.

It was the cry of a soul that had seen a thousand injustices heaped on it, and knowing that there was more, much more, to come.

He clung to her like a lifeline. His bitter tears of rage and anger slowly changed to soft sobbing against her. She rocked him gently, soothingly, her hand holding him while another hand ran through his hair.

Through her own tears she noticed Hermione and Serena Snape standing by the door. Harry paid them no heed.

Serena had found Hermione running around the potions lab trying to brew the potion she needed. Hermione explained the situation to her and Serena had decided to come and help. She pulled one of the ready-made potions from a locked cabinet and followed Hermione back to the Room of Requirement.

Hermione had her own tears running down her cheek. Serena looked like she was torn between wanting to be angry and wanting to help Ginny sooth him. Serena had come to greatly admire and like Harry. She held the calming draught in her hand. Madam Pomfrey had explained to the staff that this might happen to Harry. Serena was angry; this boy had given of himself to so many and rarely complained about how unfair life had been to him.

Hermione and Serena approached Ginny. Harry still clung to her, still crying. Serena knelt down beside the couple and helped Harry drink the potion. Between the potion and not being fully recovered from his attack, he calmed quickly into an exhausted state. He held onto Ginny still, as if afraid to let her go.

Serena surveyed the wreckage around her and suggested they help him back to the Gryffindor common room, since it was the closest.

Professor McGonagall and Ron met them at the portrait of the Fat Lady. Seeing his condition, Minerva cleared the common room as Harry was helped to the couch. Ginny sat down beside him and encouraged him to lie down. With his head in her lap, and her fingers running through his hair, he was asleep in seconds. He never noticed Hermione and Professor Snape healing the cuts on his hands.

Sensing it was one of those times for her rare, frank discussions; Professor McGonagall conjured a chair for herself and Professor Snape. Ron headed up to bed, and the four women sat for a long time, talking softly about the effects of abuse and human nature. The group broke up when the two girls started yawning. McGonagall seriously thought about telling Ginny to go up to her dorm, but decided against it. Harry was too exhausted to try anything funny.

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### **Some people won't take no for an answer...**

Harry awoke the next morning, feeling totally rested and refreshed. He was warm and quite comfortable, but something wasn't right. For one thing, he was leaning against something enticingly soft, and there appeared to be an arm wrapped around him.

He blinked at a bright flash of light and he heard the unmistakable sound of a camera, followed by several snickers.

He reached out for his glasses, lying on the table in front of him, and put them on. Glancing over his shoulder, he spotted a mass of red hair. Deciding that sometimes you had to pay the piper, he opted for the dignified approach. Ignoring the snickers and whispers, he gently lifted Ginny's arm from around him and carefully stood up. He turned around, still ignoring the others and, carefully tucking the blanket around her, kissed her on the forehead, before turning to the others.

Placing one finger to his lips, he motioned everyone away from the couch. Ron and Neville were grinning at him. Ron held Collin's camera. Hermione was grinning like mad, but she was also searching his eyes carefully, her eyes asking the question.

He smiled a little, seeing the question. "I'm better Hermione. I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to scare you, but I think I needed that."

Turning to Ron he said, "Well?"

"Oh nothing, mate," he smirked. "It's just good blackmail material if you ask me."

"Ron, you're my bloody brother! You know you'd only have to ask and I'd get you whatever you needed."

Ron's face fell at that. Obviously Harry wasn't about to be cowed by blackmailing. "What good is having blackmail material when I can't blackmail you? If you weren't already planning on marrying my sister I'd knock your block off!"

Harry grinned. "Well, do me a favor. Make me two copies of that photo. I'm sure Ginny might want one. I know I do. First time we slept together... pity nothing happened."

Ron didn't know if he should laugh or slug him at that. Hermione's eyes widened for a moment before she broke out into a fit of giggles. Neville blushed and snickered.

Harry left them standing there as he went upstairs to take a shower and change. When he returned to the Common Room, he found it empty. Ginny was gone, as were his friends. Harry had not resumed his morning jogging and if he did, it probably would be around the Quidditch Pitch and

not the lake. So he opted instead to head down to the Great Hall for breakfast, where he caught up with his friends.

Classes that day went fairly well, but Harry was uneasy. Every time he switched classes he seemed to run into Cho Chang. Cho had been his off again on again girlfriend in his fifth year. He had broken up with her because she had never really seemed all that interested in Harry. Today however, she kept shooting him strange looks. She'd brush up against him even in a nearly empty hall, and then stop him to talk to him while he picked up his books. Harry tried hiding from her. He tried waiting until the last minute to go to class. No matter where he went, she was there, following him. Hunting him. And he was beginning to get mad.

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### **Ginny...**

Ginny was working on one of her essays for charms in the common room. Ron and Harry were playing a game of wizard's chess. She felt a presence behind her. Placing her quill down, she turned to spot Lavender, Hermione and about thirty other girls standing there, grinning like mad.

Lavender muttered the magic words, "Excellent Gossip"

Ginny immediately packed up her essay and followed the girls up into the dorms. Everyone changed into their pajamas and followed Lavender into Ginny's room.

Lavender turned to Ginny. "Wait to you hear what a little birdie told me! You're going to love this!"

"It seems a certain Cho Chang decided to poach into your territory today. Her assault was precise and overwhelming. No matter where Harry went, he ran into her, literally! She finally managed to corner him late in the day, just after his last class. It seems my birdie had a front row seat for what occurred. Ginny, here's what I was told happened..."

*As Harry walked by the empty classroom he felt an arm tug on his, pulling him in. He groaned. NOT CHO AGAIN!*

*Cho had taken the time to change out of her uniform. Her blouse was too tight and it was obvious she wore no bra, Harry stood stiffly as she pressed herself against him.*

*"Harry, I think maybe we should give us another try..." She breathed seductively at him.*

*Harry disengaged himself from Cho and stepped back, his hands crossed over his chest.*

*"Cho, it didn't work the last time and there's no reason why it would work now. Besides, I'm perfectly happy with Ginny."*

*Cho carefully unbuttoned a couple buttons on her blouse, enhancing her cleavage, her breasts very noticeable in the tight blouse. "My it certainly is warm in here. Tell you what Harry; take me to the Valentines Ball. I'll make it worth your while. You'll see there are advantages to going out with me. I'm sure I can offer you things Ginny doesn't."*

*“I already have a date for the ball Cho, and in case no one’s told you, I’ve asked Ginny to marry me! I’m not going to the ball with you and that’s final!”*

*Cho tried another tactic. “But Harry, you can do so much better than that mere slip of a girl. She’s from a poor family Harry, all she wants is your money! My family has money; I’m not after yours Harry. She’s just a gold digging waif!”*

*Harry’s eye’s flared with an icy green fire and he literally glowed in a nimbus of light in front of Cho’s eyes. She stepped back in surprise. He caught her in a spell that pinned her against the wall, binding her there.*

*He walked up to her and said in an icy tone, “That ‘slip of a girl’ is worth a million of you Cho Chang. I’d die for her. I hope to marry her and raise a family with her. And if I hear you say one bad thing about her, or her family, which by the way is also MY FAMILY, I will make sure you regret it...”*

*He released her from the binding spell and she slumped to the ground, her dark eyes turning hard.*

*“Good day to you Miss Chang. For your sake, I hope you don’t annoy me again.”*

*Harry stormed from the room, his magic still flaring ominously while Cho shouted curses at his retreating back.*

Lavender leaned back after telling her tale. All the girls sighed. One commented, “Man he’s got it bad. You are so lucky Ginny!”

Ginny grinned and glanced at the clock. *Harry should be in his dorm by now*, she thought. Leaving the girls to their animated conversation about guys in general, she threw on a robe and purposely marched down the stairs and right up into the boy’s dorm.

Harry was stepping out of the bathroom, having finished his shower, with only a towel wrapped around his waist, when Ginny appeared in the dorm room. Ignoring the protests from Ron, Neville, Seamus and Dean, she grabbed Harry around the neck and pulled him into a passionate kiss. She kept at it until she had achieved the desired effect, then without a word, she turned and left the room, leaving a stunned Harry, his towel starting to slip, standing there in bewilderment.

Ron piped up, “Oy Harry! Are you sure you want to marry that? She’s barking mental if you ask me!”

Harry shot back, “Oh, and you would be upset if ‘Mione did the same thing to you, eh mate?”

Wisely, Ron held his tongue.

Once back in her own dorm, she noticed the other girls had left just as a hand grabbed her arm. Jumping, she turned to see Hermione staring at her.

“Ginny? What did you just do?”

Ginny blushed. "I ran up to Harry's dorm. He was coming out of the shower wearing nothing but a towel. I grabbed him and kissed him before running back here. Let's just say I made sure I had his attention before I left."

"Ginny, that's cruel! Funny, but cruel!"

Ginny nodded. "I know. He didn't really deserve that and I'll find a suitable way of rewarding him."

Hermione leaned forward. "You know what else this means, Ginny?"

Ginny looked confused for a moment before answering. "Cho must die?"

"No, no. Besides that! Think about what was said! Lavender gave away the secret of her source of gossip Ginny. I'll bet you five galleons she's an unregistered Animagus! And her form is a bird!"

Ginny sat in shock for a moment and then the two girls started to laugh. It was funny, but it should be noted that both girls would carefully look around for birds before doing something they didn't want anyone to know about from that point on.

The next morning, ALL of the girls at the Gryffindor table spent their time split between smiling at Harry and glaring at Cho Chang. The pretty raven-haired Ravenclaw sat nervously at her table. Something was up, but she wasn't sure what. She knew Potter well enough to know he'd never complain to anyone about her actions yesterday.

She was distracted when the morning owls started to arrive. There was a gasp in the hall when a raven flew in. No one used ravens to deliver mail! They were the most unreliable of birds for mail delivery!

Cho felt something wet land on her head. She looked up as several more ravens flew into the hall. She trembled as she felt the impact of several more moist objects. She was afraid to see what was happening. More ravens flew into the hall. By now, there was a small flock of them, a flock that was continuing to grow with more and more arrivals.

Cho stood quickly at the sound of the first snickers. Turning from the table, she started to walk out of the hall. As the ravens followed, and the snickers grew louder, Cho started to run. The students finally gave up and laughed outright as Cho reached the entrance to the Great Hall, trailing a flock of ravens who dive-bombed the now shrieking girl.

The girls of Gryffindor snickered at the fleeing girl. Harry eyed Ginny suspiciously; she gave him an innocent look and calmly asked, "More bacon Harry?"

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### **Conversations and Confrontations...**

"You know, there are times I question my mental state," Serena Snape told her husband that evening. She was pacing again. Something she did a lot of now that she was married, and it was all *his* fault. Well, that wasn't exactly true, but he didn't need to know that!

At his questioning look, she continued. “You’re sneaky, like to intimidate people and enjoy reducing small children to tears. What I’m trying to figure out is what possessed me to marry you!”

“Would you like me to list the reasons?” He asked, sardonically.

When she shot him a scowl but remained silent, he went back to his book, or tried to. Before meeting Serena, his evenings were spent alone, grading papers and going over his lesson plans. Since their marriage however, he found the quiet evenings with his wife to be the best part of his day. Oh, he still enjoyed terrifying students caught out after curfew, knocking off house points and giving out onerous detentions, but he’d found life was now made up of more enjoyable pursuits. Reading was one, but then, so was watching his wife. Pacing, sitting in front of the fire reading, angrily shouting at him, it didn’t matter. Gods, he was going soft!

Realizing he’d been staring at her, he gave up, put the book down and asked her what was wrong.

“Severus, I know you want to find out what’s going on, but you can’t grill him! He’ll clam up and shut you out if you do.”

“What, you think I’m going to rack him and demand answers?”

“If you thought you could get away with it...” She broke off at his incredulous look. “Ok, ok, so that wasn’t fair. But still, you can be intimidating when you want to be. And you usually do! You’ll need to be gentle.”

At his snort, she stomped her foot. “I mean it, Severus! If you drive that boy away, I’ll slip you so many potions, you’ll think you were a eleven-year-old Hufflepuff girl. You’ll be skipping down the halls with your hair in braids, thinking it perfectly normal!”

“Your faith in me is touching,” he replied in an offended tone.

“*I know* you, Severus. You may not mean to, but you can be a rather daunting person sometimes. Oh, who am I trying to kid? Of course you mean to. We both know you enjoy it! Look, what I’m trying to say...badly from the look on your face...is that the history between you and Harry can make things a little awkward. He’s starting to trust you, Severus. Don’t do anything to break that trust, please,” she finished gently.

As a knock sounded on the door, she sent him a pleading look. Sighing, he stood and hugged her. “I’ll be careful. But certain things need to be explained, Serena. We both know that.”

Rising on her toes, she kissed his cheek. “Warm up the tea while I get the door.”

A few minutes later, Harry found himself seated in the dining room in the Snape’s apartment, being plied with tea and small talk. Serena Snape sat next to him, while her husband sat across the table, facing them both and shooting him calculating looks. Something seemed off in their behavior. He didn’t figure out what it was until Severus started to speak.

“Harry, for nearly twenty years I spied on Voldemort for Dumbledore’s. One of the things I learned was how to observe and piece together facts that seemed unrelated and how to put those



unrelated facts together to form a picture of the truth. I've done this for so many years now, that's it's become an ingrained action on my part.

Over the last few months, I've made several observations, and would like to share them with you. If I am correct, I will require answers as well. Before I start however, I should probably tell you that I have not told the Headmaster about the things I have observed and I probably won't," he continued ominously, "so long as you are honest with me."

"I'll try to tell you what I can, Sir," Harry replied, nervously, "but as I don't know what you're talking about at the moment, I can't promise anything."

"Very well, let's begin. First, there is a group of students running around the school, all wearing phoenix rings similar to your own. Some of these students are at the top of my defense class. Second, on the day of your attack, I watched a group of students move about in a coordinated, precise manner. Students from different house, I might add. Even you will admit that, with the house rivalries, this is not a common occurrence?"

Harry nodded stiffly. He knew where this was going now, or at least had a good idea, and didn't like it. He wanted nothing more than to get up and leave, but knew he couldn't. When he opened his mouth to comment, Snape stopped him with a raised hand.

"Third," Severus continued, "in reviewing Serena's memory of Malfoy's attack on her in a Pensieve, I noticed several unusual things. Mr. Longbottom cast a shielding spell that I've never heard of, and rather than dissipating like most shields do, he had to remove it.

In addition, Miss Lovegood cast right through that shield, yet Malfoy's hex splashed harmlessly against it. As you know from your DADA classes, the shields taught to students block in both directions. You cannot cast through your own shield, which is why they dissipate, allowing you to cast at your opponent between shield spells.

And in an interesting twist in an already bizarre puzzle, both Longbottom and Lovegood cast wandlessly."

When Harry's eyes dropped and refused to meet his again, Severus sighed inwardly. He took in the young man's rigid posture and fisted hands on the tabletop. He didn't want to make Harry uncomfortable, but he intended to get some answers.

"And finally, I've noticed that almost the entire Physical Fitness club wears a phoenix ring, except for a few Quidditch players here and there. But I'd be willing to bet those Quidditch players are camouflage.

My conclusion, Harry, is a simple one. You've formed a secret society here at Hogwarts. You've taught students advanced techniques and are clearly training them for a purpose. As I said at the beginning, I have not taken any of this to the Headmaster, but I think it's time for an explanation, don't you?"

Harry leaned back heavily in his chair and reached up to grab the locket hanging around his neck. He needed help and desperately wished he could ask his parents. Could he trust the Snapes? Dare he trust them? The locket thumped against his hand once, before warming in approval.

*That was interesting, he thought. I guess the thump was Sirius. He never liked Professor Snape. I wonder if Mum hexed him? She doesn't seem to have a problem with the Snape's. I'd have thought Sirius would have learned not to argue with her by now.*

His reverie was interrupted when Serena started speaking.

"Harry, my husband and I are hoping you'll trust us enough to tell us what is going on."

Harry stood up, pacing back and forth for a moment. Finally, he turned to them and said, "You're right. I have reactivated the DA from last year, but in an entirely new form. I'm counting on your discretion on this matter. Our fighting method is unlike anything you've seen before, and I'm hoping that goes for Voldemort's forces. We've invented some new spells, and new techniques. All of the DA members recognize and accept the danger they're placing themselves in. What most of the adults don't seem to realize is; it's our war too. I know that the teachers like to think that the students are protected at Hogwarts, but we all know that's not true. The castle's been breached before. And while some think we have nothing to offer, we intend to change that.

"But Harry, you're just children! You can't be expected..." Serena protested.

"With respect Professor, I have to disagree with you," Harry interrupted her harshly. "I haven't been a child in a long time. I've faced Voldemort five times and survived. I've held my friends and watched them bleed, unable to help them. Two years ago, I watched as a young man was killed for no better reason than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Last year, I watched my Godfather murdered before my eyes.

Every one of my DA members has lost friends or family to Voldemort and his followers. None of us have been untouched by this war. Are those the experiences of 'children', Professor? I think not!

Gods, I'd give every galleon I own for a normal life! Do you know what it's like to look at the person you want to spend your life with and know, KNOW, that you'll probably not live long enough to marry her?

Voldemort brought the war to me. I didn't ask for this! I was thrown into this war and told to fight or die. If I have to do this, I'm not going to play by his rules anymore!"

He stopped and raked a hand through his hair. Looking into her horror stricken face, he grimaced and said, "I don't mean to snap at you Ma'am. I have tremendous respect for you and your husband. This past year has seen our relationship alter dramatically and I need your help. But please don't call us children anymore. We don't have time to be."

Serena looked like she wanted to say more, but Severus reached across the table and touched her on the arm, halting her.

"Harry's right," Severus said quietly. "We both know what he's facing. If he's preparing the student body to defend themselves, he's doing them a favor. We both saw the vision in Harry's Pensieve. Most of the Order was downed, including a number of Hogwarts teachers. If that happens, Hogwarts will be defenseless. I think, Serena, that at this point, we need to be asking Harry how we can help him."

Serena nodded in agreement. It was one of those arguments that you hated to lose, but logic clearly ruled.

Severus turned back to Harry. "I promise you, none of this will be told to the Headmaster. Now, the real question is, how can we help?"

Harry grinned at the two. "Someday I hope we'll be able to all sit down over dinner and look back at this moment as a fond memory..." then added, sotto voce, "if I survive..."

Serena's eye's blazed and she shook a finger under his nose. "Listen to me young man! I'm not going to allow you talk like that. You're going to survive and you're going to live to a ripe old age with your Ginny and a houseful of children..." Softening her tone, she continued. "Harry you need to have confidence in yourself. You inspire other people and give them confidence, have some in yourself. Besides," she said, with a devilish grin, "you can't lose now that Severus and I are on your side!"

Harry and Severus both rolled their eyes at that. When she glared at them, they both grinned back at her.

"But seriously Harry," Severus asked, "What can we do to help?"

"Sir, my biggest concern lies with the security of the castle and, I hate to say this, but your house is our biggest problem area. I'd really like to find out whom in Slytherin I can trust and rely on. But I can't just approach them. It's not like I'm their favorite person. I'll have enough trouble when I bring Slytherins into the DA. But I really want to force this issue of reaching beyond house boundaries. If you can recommend ten Slytherins we can trust, from the fifth year up, I'd appreciate it."

This surprised Severus. Harry was not only asking a great deal, he was putting a great deal of trust in his opinion.

"I have other things I'd like both your help with. But right now, that's the biggest thing I can think of," Harry stated.

When Harry left the apartment an hour later, he felt a lot lighter. As he walked down the corridor, he thought about the people he'd just left. He respected the Snape's greatly. He still had a difficult time adjusting to all the changes Serena had made in her husband, true, but he trusted the man.

He stopped and grinned. He felt too good to be walking around dim corridors! Transforming into Wings, he flew down the corridor then, in a flash of flame, he was high about the castle, soaring, diving and circling the towers. For some reason, tonight's conversation left him feeling upbeat and lighter than he had in ages!

Revealing in the freedom of flight, his song burst forth, reverberating off the castle's walls. A few lights came on, as people wondered at the noise.

Diving towards the Astronomy tower, he pulled up, flared his wings, landing next to Fawkes, who eyed him in amusement.

*It does well sometimes to stretch ones wings and fly for the fun of it, does it not Fledgling?*

*It does indeed, Fawkes!*

*You did extremely well tonight, but enough talk. Let us add some of our magic to this place. Let's fly!*

The two phoenixes sprang aloft, circling each other, singing their song of the light as they spiraled up over Hogwarts.

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### **Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...**

Albus Dumbledore couldn't help but be wistful as he watched his long time friend and Harry Potter circling high above Hogwarts, singing their song. The wards of Hogwarts shimmered slightly, as the powerful phoenix magic strengthened them. He could see other people staring out the windows, looking up at the glowing wards and listening to the song.

*Let them take heart from this, he thought. Dark times may be coming, but the light still shined bright. What joy it must be to be able to fly! He wasn't sure what kind of connection Harry had with Fawkes, but clearly they could communicate some how. I have to remember to ask him about it sometime. I'd like to know what Fawkes thinks.*

Albus once dabbled in Ani-magic, but he quickly gave it up. There was no fun in being a goat...

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### **WE SURRENDER!...**

This was supposed to be a Hogsmeade weekend but, because of the last attack, the school had been opened to visitors instead of allowing the students free reign of the town. Tomorrow would be the Valentines Ball for the students.

Remus Lupin waited nervously in front of the Three Broomsticks for his guests to arrive. This had been planned for a while, and only Harry's attack had postponed it. He smiled warmly when Fred and George apparated in.

"Gentlemen! I'm so pleased you could attend. And my friends will be even more pleased."

"If you'll follow me please, we'll meet with my friends on what they consider to be both neutral and sacred territory. I do regret that, once we hit a certain point, I'll have to blindfold you. My friends are most concerned about their personal security. Now, unless you have any objections, shall we proceed up to the school?"

"Objections?"

"Of course we have..."

"...no objections. We just..."

“...want this war to end!...”

“Very well Gentlemen, follow me. Regrettably, I cannot stay, as this is a secret ceremony. But I will be nearby if you need me.”

Remus led the two men from Hogsmeade up the road to Hogwarts. The two Weasley twins were so nervous; they barely paid any attention to ex-classmates as they followed him.

Fred and George were sweating at this point. The amount of secrecy that Remus had talked to them about was extreme.

Upon reaching Hogwarts castle, Remus pulled out two black silk hoods and handed them to the twins, with instructions to put them on. With trembling fingers they pulled the hoods over their heads. Remus placed one twin's hand on the other's shoulder and led them deeper into the school. He walked them up stairs, and down. He walked them down long corridors and short ones before reaching his destination.

Remus stopped at a door and tried not to grin. True, the twins couldn't see him, but it was the principle of the matter! The door swung open and a deep menacing voice came from the dimly lit chamber within.

“WHO DARES DEFILE THIS SACRED GROUND?”

“It is I, Remus Lupin. I bring two supplicants who ask for the ritual of surrender.”

“BRING THE SUPPLICANTS FORWARD!”

Remus brought the twins forward into the room. He then quickly grabbed a black hooded robe and stood with several other hooded figures.

“REMOVE THY HOODS SO THAT WE MIGHT GAZE UPON THEE!”

As the twins removed their hoods, they both gave a squeak of fright and grabbed each other.

The room was dimly lit. There were few torches visible. A group of several men stood facing them, dressed in black from head to toe. Their faces hidden, made invisible by their hoods, the group stood silently. Behind them was a huge, bare-chested man, standing by a large iron gong and holding a hammer. Another group of five black robed figures stood off to one side.

In front of the twins lay a small stone table, dripping with entrails and blood.

One of the figures in front of the twins spoke in harsh tones. “Do thee, of thy own free will, agree to undergo the ritual of surrender?”

The man in the far back hit the gong.

GONG!

It was an eerie sound; it seemed to be part metal and part human scream.

“Y... Y... Yes!” Stammered Fred.

“W... W... We want to surrender!” Gulped George.

GONG!

The figure spoke again. “Very well, produce the instrument of surrender!”

From the back of the room came the creaking sound of a massive door opening. A fifteen-foot troll shuffled out, carrying a parchment. The twins cowered back from him. The troll looked at the gore-dripped table and, leaning over, licked it clean. Once he was done, he placed the parchment, a quill and a small knife on the table. With that, the troll shuffled back to its room and the door closed again with a massive boom.

The figure spoke once more. “Sign the instrument of surrender, then deposit one drop of blood upon it!”

GONG!

Fred quickly signed his name without bothering to read it. George followed suit, then the two deposited a drop of blood on the document.

GONG!

“You have proven yourselves capable adversaries, worthy of our attention. Now we have but one more thing to do to complete the ritual. REMOVE THY OUTER GARMENTS!”

GONG!

Fred and George quickly started to strip. They were so frightened they were making a mess of their clothing. Fred pulled his shirt off, causing buttons to fly in every direction.

The door in the back of the room swung open once more. Again, the troll shuffled forward. This time the troll carried a huge flaming branding iron.

George fainted dead away. Fred grabbed his brother by the arms and, dragging him, bolted for the door. When the door closed behind him, the scene flickered and faded, revealing Hogwart’s Great Hall.

Fred gaped. The five hooded figures remained, but everything else was gone, replaced by tables filled with students and teachers, enjoying the lunch and a free show. When the laughter, wolf whistles and catcalls started, a blush enveloped his body. Damn! He was standing in the Great Hall in his underwear!

Molly and Arthur sat with Dumbledore at the head table, each smiling at their offspring. The Headmaster waved at the pair, his eyes twinkling, and asked if they’d like to get dressed and join them for lunch.

The five remaining hooded figures bowed to the head table and marched stately out of the Great Hall, carrying the magical contract the twins had signed, agreeing they would never prank any of them again. A copy of the contract appeared in Fred's hand.

As the last hooded figure passed from the room, every banner in the hall changed to read, "MARAUDERS RULE!"

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### **The Ball...**

Harry woke to the sound of Ron cursing a blue streak. His friend was sitting on his bed, a huge pile of sticks beside him, and a very small pile of sickly looking flowers in front of him.

Ron was trying to transfigure the dead sticks into flowers. Harry chuckled. Ron shot him a hateful glare.

"Would you like some help mate?" Harry asked.

"No! It's not the same if you do it Harry," Ron replied heatedly.

"Ron, I'm not offering to do it for you. I'm offering to help you do it."

"What? How's that?"

"Ron you're just going about it wrong. Here, do what I tell you. Close your eyes. Then take a few deep breaths to calm yourself. Picture the flower in your mind carefully. Imagine each petal, the stem, and each leaf on your flower. Now, hold the picture in your mind Ron, see it, and imagine how happy 'Mione will feel when you give her the flower. Keep that feeling in your mind while you let the magic out slowly, just a little bit at a time and say, 'Floris Transfigcontatus'"

Ron's wand tip slowly lit up to a flaring light as he muttered the incantation. When the light cleared, Ron looked down at a perfect white rose with just a hint of blush red on the edges of the petals. Ron looked astounded; he snatched another stick from his pile, closed his eyes and repeated the process. It worked! He shot a grateful look at Harry, who smiled back.

"See mate, it's easy once you know how to do it. Like I said, I wasn't going to do it for you, but I'll help you anytime you want to learn how. Now, if you want to be a little more creative, start changing the flower slightly so they aren't all the same looking."

While Ron made his flowers, Harry pulled out his notebook and started to sketch something. Curious, Ron walked over to see that Harry was drawing another jewelry pattern.

"Harry?"

Harry looked up from his notebook. "Yeah mate?"

"I was thinking... well... you know that ring you made for Ginny?" Ron was blushing furiously.

“You’d like to give something similar to ‘Mione?” Harry couldn’t help but smile broadly. *Hermione is going to be so pleased with this*, he thought.

“Yeah, but I don’t want you to make it. But I don’t have a lot of money either...”

“Ron how about this. Do you have a ten galleon piece?”

“Yeah I have one. It’s in my trunk.”

“Don’t bother getting it now. Do you know what galleons are made of Ron?”

At Ron’s confused look, Harry chuckled.

“Ron, a galleon is mostly gold, five ounces to be exact, with a little base metal thrown in to give it extra strength. If you’d like, we can melt down your Galleon and I’ll help you turn it into a ring like the one I made for Ginny. I’m afraid you’ll have to let me conjure a stone or two for it, but I’ll keep them small if you want. You’ll make the basic ring; I’ll add some finishing touches and a few stones to it. The bulk of the work will be yours. What do you say mate?”

He looked at Harry gratefully and nodded in thanks.

When Ron went back to making his flowers, Harry returned to his drawing. It was Valentine’s Day and he wanted to make something special to give to Ginny. Looking at the design, he thought about it. It looked simple enough, but the making of it was quite complex for only two stones. Harry shut the curtains to his bed to gain some privacy before starting the process of making his gift.

Later that evening, Harry and Ron waited anxiously for their dates to come down from the girl’s dorm. Ron had gone overboard with his transfiguring that afternoon, but he didn’t care. He stood there with an armful of flowers.

Harry’s gift was sitting in a small box in his pocket. He felt uncomfortable giving it to Ginny in front of Ron, so he planned to pull her aside while Hermione confronted Ron and his small flowery jungle.

When Hermione and Ginny came down the stairs, Harry’s heart caught in his throat. Ginny was wearing a new dress robe; Harry had picked up another robe also over the holiday. Between his training and his age, he had already outgrown his old robes by nearly an inch. Molly said she could fix them, but in the meantime new robes were in order.

Hermione and Ginny walked over to Harry. Hermione looked around trying to spot Ron.

“Harry, where’s Ron?”

“Oy! I’m right here!” Said the two arms holding the flowers. Hermione’s eyes widened.

“Ron?”



“Here ‘Mione, I made these for you!” He tried to hand them to her, but couldn’t see her with all the flowers in the way. Ginny giggled. Hermione took a step back from Ron in consternation. He was holding 200 long stem roses in his arms!

Harry took Ginny’s hand and led her to a corner, away from Hermione and Ron as they struggled with hundreds of flowers.

“Did he really make them Harry?” Ginny asked.

“I showed him how and helped walk him through his first one. After that, he was on his own...” Then Harry’s look turned sly and he whispered, “He also asked me to help him make ‘Mione a promise ring!”

Ginny laughed, saying, “I hope he does a better job on the ring than he did on the flowers or Hermione won’t be able to lift her hand.”

“Ron?” Hermione questioned.

“‘Mione, where are you?”

Harry and Ginny both snickered, listening to the over-flowered couple trying to find each other.

Harry suddenly turned shy as he hesitantly slid a box across the table to Ginny. “I made this for you, but I didn’t want to give it to you in front of Ron. He worked so hard on those flowers.”

Ginny opened the box and gasped. Inside the box sat a small, heart shaped clear crystal. Embedded inside it was a red heart shaped stone. The whole thing was attached with a delicate silver chain.

Harry murmured, “The outer stone is diamond, the inner one is a ruby. I hope you like it.”

Ginny immediately turned around, lifted the back of her hair and told him to put it on. He did so with trembling fingers, fumbling with the clasp a few times.

Harry looked at her anxiously as she turned around and looked at the heart now resting around her neck. “Do you like it Gin? I know it’s not much... but when I drew that design I thought for sure you’d like it.”

Ginny stopped him with a gentle finger to his lips. She gave him a shy smile in return and flowed into his arms to kiss him. They stayed like that for a while until Ron tapped Harry on the shoulder. Hermione, in her ever-practical way, had solved the problem of so many extra flowers by handing out dozens of them to the other boys to give to their dates. She looked quite pleased with herself.

The two couples left the common room and headed down to the Great Hall. There, they met up with Neville and Luna. Dumbledore had, by popular demand, brought back the Wailing Wizards as the band. The hall was decorated to match the holiday, even down to illusionary cherubs flying around shooting arrows at people.

Ginny planned on taking it easy with Harry. He was well recovered, but he still pushed himself occasionally into exhaustion if he wasn't careful. His one attempt to train had been a complete disaster. Ginny had insisted on watching over him during that attempt. Harry had started out well enough, but had been badly defeated by his simulated opponents very early on. After conferring with Hermione, they decided that Harry would work on building up his endurance for a while, before restarting his combat training. To Harry, it was a humbling experience.

The three couples sat around the table enjoying drinks when the band finally started to play. Harry wanted to dance with Ginny, but she insisted they wait until the band played a slower dance. In a total reversal of roles, this time it was Harry that watched the dancing couples wistfully. After another fast paced song, the band finally started up a slow ballad. Ginny allowed her self to be led out onto the dance floor.

Ginny and Harry didn't really dance. They held onto each other and spent most of their time shuffling their feet while looking into the eyes of the other. When the dance finally ended and a more spirited song began, Ginny started to lead him back to the table. He pulled her back to him to dance some more. She was annoyed that he overrode her plans for him, but he told her that he'd rather tire himself dancing with her than training.

As the dance progressed, Ginny finally stopped worrying about Harry tiring himself out. They spent an enjoyable time, occasionally switching partners with Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna.

It wasn't until the dance was nearly over that it happened. Harry and Ginny were in the middle of the dance floor when the Great Hall was plunged into darkness. The crowd gasped in surprise and someone screamed.

A voice shouted, "Look at the ceiling!"

The enchanted ceiling had changed. Among the stars now floated the Morsmordre, the death mark of the Dark Lord!

When the lights had went out, a number of students pulled out their wands. The sound of "Lumos" could be heard all over the hall. All of the DA members had their wands out, ready for the expected attack. The torches in the Great Hall flickered and returned to normal.

Dumbledore strode up to the stage. With an amplified voice he spoke. "Quiet please. Prefects gather your students and hold them here, until a teacher comes to relieve you. Teachers, we must search the castle. Start with your houses and work out from there. Each Head of House will take a head count of their students. Make sure all of the younger students are accounted for. In the meantime, I will seal the castle."

As the teachers hurried from the room, the booming sound of the great doors could be clearly heard, as could the sound of the massive beams locking them.

Harry steered Ginny back to their table. No one felt like dancing anymore. Everyone knew the mark signified someone's death.

Harry and the rest sat at their table not saying much. A good many of the students were upset and the prefects had their hands full trying to keep everyone in the Great Hall. Harry sat silently for a

moment longer, and then he started waving some DA members over to his table. Once everyone arrived, they all stared expectantly at him.

Harry spoke in a low tone. "Find all our members that attended the dance. Have them circulate among the students and help calm them. Let's post four members by the main entrance and another two by the northern entrance. The rest of us," he said, indicating Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna, "will start banishing tables and conjuring sleeping bags. We have no idea how long it will be before the teachers return, but I suspect it will be number of hours. Let's get them calm and bedded down. There's nothing else we can do for now."

It was nearly four hours later when Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall returned to the Great Hall. He was surprised to see the hall lights dimmed, and the room filled with sleeping students. Everyone had a sleeping bag, and the tables were gone from sight. Four students stood watch over the door. They relaxed and pocketed their wands when they saw it was Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall. A few prefects and some students wandered up and down the rows of sleeping students. Every so often, they would stop to speak with someone in hushed tones. Two other students stood near the northern door to the hall, talking with a third. Finally, the third one broke away from them when he noticed the teachers standing at the entrance.

Dumbledore and McGonagall walked up the central aisle between the sleeping bodies. He noted that Ron and Hermione were sharing an oversized sleeping bag, as were Neville and Luna. Ginny was asleep, alone in an oversized bag, which identified the student walking up to them.

Dumbledore said softly, "Is this your doing Harry?"

"Not just myself Sir. We just figured that this is what you would have wanted, get everyone calmed and bedded down."

"Quite right Harry. I think you too should get some rest. I fear the next few days will be most trying for all of us."

"Sir? Can I ask... who..."

Dumbledore walked away wearily, but Professor McGonagall stayed a moment longer. She placed a hand on his arm and said in a choked voice, "It... it was Nigel Goldsmith, one of our Gryffindor first years."

Impulsively, Harry hugged her. McGonagall stiffened for a moment before hugging him back. "We'll get through this Professor. We're Gryffindors."

She nodded weakly at him before following Dumbledore. Harry crawled into his sleeping bag, but he didn't sleep. *NIGEL!* He thought. *I barely knew him. He was just another first year.* Harry felt anger begin to burn in him, Voldemort's payment, when it finally came due, was going to be expensive, he vowed to himself. As hard as he could, he couldn't remember Nigel's face. That shamed and angered him even more.

Harry lay there a long time before falling to sleep, so absorbed in his own thoughts he barely even noticed as Ginny rolled over and snuggled up to him. Running his fingers through her soft hair, he eventually drifted off.

The next day it was announced that all classes were cancelled for several days. Everyone was told to come to the Great Hall for the noon meal; no one would be permitted to skip. In the Gryffindor tower, older students spent a majority of their time comforting the first and second years. They were understandably frightened. Serena Snape mixed up a large batch of calming draughts, and sent them to the house prefects to be given out as needed.

It was a much-subdued Gryffindor house that went down to the noon meal. They had assembled everyone in the common room and went down to the Great Hall together. Apparently, they weren't the only houses to travel on mass that day. All of the houses arrived in a similar manner.

Sitting down at their table, Harry noted a group of strangers off to one side. The house banners had been removed from the Great Hall, as had the Hogwarts Banner. Replacing these were black banners. Once the students had all entered the hall, Dumbledore stood to speak.

"I'm sure by now many of you are aware of the events of last night. In an attempt to find out who did this, we have with us today several Aurors who will be checking your wands. When your name is called, you will come up to the small table you see here, to have your wand checked. Once you have it checked, you will be given a slip that will allow you to return to your common rooms.

The process of checking wands lasted a long time. Ginny and Ron had been checked and were waiting for Hermione and Harry when Dumbledore approached them.

"Harry, Mr. and Miss Weasley, I would like to have a word with you in my office tonight, after the evening meal."

The three nodded their heads in acceptance.

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### **Family Reunions and Surprises...**

After dinner, Harry, Ron and Ginny left the Great Hall and went to Dumbledore's office. Harry knocked and the door opened.

Inside the office were Dumbledore, Minister Fudge, Percy Weasley, and a gray haired, tall man.

Fudge spotted Harry, and Harry's immediate scowl at seeing him. Turning to Percy, he said in a loud voice, "I'll leave this in your capable hands, Weatherbee! Remember what I said Dumbledore. Make him agree!" With that Fudge made a quick exit using Dumbledore's floo.

"Ah Harry, come in. Sit down please. You too Miss Weasley, Mr. Weasley."

Turning to the two Weasleys he said, "I've asked you here because I thought you might want to visit with your older brother, and because it does concern your family." His tone hardened as he looked at Harry.

"Harry, the Minister of Magic has decided that you are not being properly trained here at Hogwarts and has decided to remove you from the school. The minister says that he intends to overturn the custody rights of Mrs. and Mr. Weasley and have you assigned as a ward of the state.

I have told him he had no legal basis for such a move, and the Wizengamot would not stand for it.”

“Take me away from my family, sir?” Harry asked in a weak voice. Ginny gasped and grabbed his hand while Ron shot a murderous look at Percy.

Percy broke in. “Come now Harry, it’s not like we’re really your family you know, whatever my parents say! Besides, our finest hit wizard in the Dark Arts will train you. Then, when we feel you’re ready, we’ll issue a formal challenge to V-V-Voldemort and it will be all over.”

Harry started to get angry, but instead of lashing out, he fed his anger into his determination. He could feel his magic broiling up within, checked, controlled and massive. He turned to Percy, eyes flaring brightly.

“What would you know about family Percy? You abandoned yours to spend your days licking the ass of that sorry excuse for a Minister. Who’s going to train me? YOU? You couldn’t cast your way out of a paper bag!”

Percy sputtered, “Don’t you talk about Minister Fudge like that. He is a great man! And of course I’m not going to train you. Hit Wizard Schanne here will train you, with me overseeing that training.”

Harry looked over at Schanne. He was a tall, lanky man with graying hair. He looked like he had spent too many mornings staring into the rising sun, as fine wrinkles extended from his eyes.

Then the absurdity of what the Minister was trying to do hit Harry, and he started to laugh. It was a deep and derisive laughter that caused Schanne’s eyes to darken with anger. *This impudent pup!* He thought. *This kid! So he thinks he’s that good eh? Let’s see about that.*

Schanne’s hand twitched slightly then moved towards his wand. Before he could touch it however, he froze. Harry held his own wand under Schanne’s chin, pushing so hard his chin was forced upward. The young man had closed the distance between them so fast that the hit wizard never even saw him move. One moment, the kid was sitting in his chair, the next moment he was digging his wand into the man’s neck!

Schanne’s Adam’s apple bobbed nervously as he stared into those emerald eyes. His body was bound using a technique he didn’t know. He could read the message in those eyes and, for the first time in his long career, Schanne had doubts about his own abilities. *GODS! I never even heard him say the incantation!* Schanne thought. He tried to flinch back from the raw power dancing in those eyes.

“Do it.” Harry hissed at him. “Do it if you think you’re good enough.”

“Enough! Harry, release Mr. Schanne please.” Dumbledore asked.

“As you wish Headmaster,” Harry replied in a conversational tone. He wasn’t angry, he could feel the magic pouring through him, but held it in check and tightly controlled. He marveled at the fact that he wasn’t angry. He knew he should be, but he wasn’t.

Harry turned away from Schanne, who staggered sideways.

Schanne turned to Percy, who had been watching everything, and told him, “Mr. Weasley, I seriously doubt there is anything I could teach this wizard. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised to discover he could teach me a few things.”

Turning to Harry, Schanne continued. “Mr. Potter, I hope you will accept my apologies. Minister Fudge and Mr. Weasley here led me to believe you were inadequately prepared and under trained. I can see now that’s not the case. When you graduate, I’d be happy to personally vouch for you, if you should choose Auror as your career path.”

Harry sat back down and nodded to the Hit Wizard saying, “Thank you Mr. Schanne.”

Schanne nodded to Dumbledore and Percy, and then stepped into the floo, leaving Percy standing there in the wreckage of his and Fudge’s plan.

“Ah yes... well... I see... I will return to the Minister and report this turn of events to him.”

Percy turned to leave when, in an icy voice, Harry said, “Percy, the time is coming when I will be forced to break Fudge and all who stand with him. For the sake of our family, quit him now before you get hurt.” Harry’s tone softened. “We miss you Percy and our family hurts because of it, especially your Mother and Father. For your sake, and for your family’s sake, come home before it’s too late. Think on it Percy, we want you home and safe.”

Ginny and Ron gaped at Harry, but Dumbledore peered over his half moon glasses with an approving look.

Percy looked like he had been punched in the gut. He stepped into the floo and left the office without speaking.

The four of them sat for a moment, and then Dumbledore broke the silence. “Harry, that was a generous gesture, considering what he was trying to do. I’m not sure I could have said that, if I had been in your shoes.”

“I had to make the offer sir. It wouldn’t have been right not to do so.”

Ron broke in. “But Harry, he wanted... He tried to...”

“Ron, you don’t turn your back on your family. Percy hasn’t learned that lesson. But just because he hasn’t learned it, doesn’t mean we have to do it.”

Ron sat there, thoughtful. Ginny grinned and nodded at Ron. She didn’t like what Percy had done to them, but she wasn’t ready to give up on him either.

Then Harry frowned. He could still feel the magic in him, just a hairsbreadth away, like it was coiled and ready to strike out. Normally, he could feel the magic ebb and flow within him, but this time was different. He had felt the magic rising up within him, but there was no sign of it returning to normal.

Harry stood up and walked over to a mirror on the wall. He looked almost normal, no glowing light, no flaring nimbus of raw energy. The only difference was in his eyes; he could see the flicker of magic illuminating his eyes. His eyes swept the room; there were no exploding windows, no rumblings. Nothing!

Dumbledore watched him carefully while Ginny and Ron gazed at him in puzzlement.

“What is it Harry? Something has obviously disturbed you.”

“Sir, I’m not sure how to explain this... it’s not going away...” He said with a confused look on his face.

“Sit Harry, and try to tell me what is happening.”

He returned to his seat, “Always before, I could feel the power increase tremendously when I got angry. It would rush into me and, as I calmed down, it would ebb away. But it’s not ebbing away Headmaster. I can still feel it! It’s just sitting there, waiting for me to tap into it.”

Dumbledore leaned forward, clasping his hands together in front of his face and stared intently at Harry. Ron and Ginny sat silently, watching the exchange between the two.

“How does this make you feel, Harry?”

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment before replying, “At first it was good, like I was powerful. But it’s a little frightening, Sir.”

“Do you feel any temptation to use that power, Harry?”

“I don’t think so, Sir. I suppose someday it might be interesting to see what I can do, but I don’t feel any need to rush out and start casting spells. It’s a strange feeling however, like something massive is sitting on my shoulder, waiting for me to call on it. And I’m not sure I like what it’s done to my eyes.”

Ginny turned sharply, reached up and, grabbing his chin, turned his head towards her. She stared into his eyes for a moment. She could see the light in them and the power they suggested. Then she smiled and shrugged. “I like it Harry. It makes you look good and besides, now I’ll be able to find you in the dark.”

Dumbledore chuckled at this, but broke in saying, “Harry, what were you feeling when you felt the power surge in you?”

“Well, I was angry. But instead of letting the power lash out, I sort of...well, I let my anger feed into the determination I had. I wasn’t going to let Fudge take me out of school or take away my family. The anger didn’t last long either. I don’t know. It’s strange and a little hard to explain,” he finished in frustration.

“Well Harry, I am pleased you’ve reached this point. It was an important step for you.”

“You knew this would happen Sir? And you didn’t tell me? Why?”

“I couldn’t tell you Harry, because everyone in your situation learns how to tap their power differently. I am relieved that you feel no temptation to use it. And with your permission, I think it’s time for me to take a more personal role in your combat training. I think you’re recovered enough that you can resume your training, and I’d like to come observe, maybe even offer some pointers, if you will allow me.”

“I think I’d like that, Sir,” Harry said with a smile.

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## **Jacks Owl...**

It had been a week since the meeting in Dumbledore’s office. Dumbledore had attended two training sessions, and his advice was turning out to be useful.

Harry and his friends were enjoying the morning meal when the owls came in. A pretty Tawny owl swooped down to Harry.

When the Tawny owl swooped down to Harry, he cried, “Hoots! I hope Jack’s okay!”

After removing the letter from the owl, Harry fed her bits of bacon. After offering the owl water, which was refused, Harry sent her on her way and opened Jack’s letter.

*Harry,  
Hey kid! How ya doing? How’s your pretty little redhead? I’ve looked over the plans Ron sent me, along with the map of the town. It’s not a bad plan, but you could improve it.*

*Ron has a good head on his shoulders, but he’s planned for a single axis of attack, plowing up the middle of the town, Harry. You need to be more flexible. Ideally, you should have several plans; each designed to address several areas of attack.*

*Outline your goals; first and foremost, you need to buy time to allow for the civilians to escape. Then, you need to be able to hold long enough for reinforcements to arrive. There are five major roads into town; you need to plan to defend each road, depending on the direction the enemy strikes from.*

*If you can manage to surprise your enemy and stall him you, stand a good chance of allowing your friends to evacuate the civilians. Then they can link up with you. The key, of course, is getting there before the bad guys enter the town.*

*Remember kid; every plan gets thrown out the window when you first hit the dirt. That’s where your training will pay off. Damn, I wish I could join you! Keep up with the training Harry. Work them hard and you’ll knock ’em dead! Oh, and take good care of your little witch.*

*Jack*

Harry read Jack’s letter several times before handing it to Ron. Ron looked it over carefully his brow furrowed in thought before commenting.



“Makes sense Harry. I’ll start drawing up plans for five possible actions. And we’ll pass them out to everyone tonight at the meeting...”

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### **The DA, near the end of February...**

Harry watched the door tensely. He expected company tonight and even though his friends knew to expect it, the rest of the DA did not.

The door slid open and Professor Severus Snape stepped into the room. Everyone froze. A PROFESSOR! THEY HAD BEEN CAUGHT! Snape held the door open while ten Slytherins, led by Blaise Zabini, walked in. Wands whipped up and everyone tensed.

In the silence that followed, Harry’s voice cut through everyone present. “The first one to cast a single spell will have to deal with me. Now put your wands away!”

Heads whipped up to stare at Harry, incredulously. Harry stood on the raised dais and repeated in a softer, more dangerous tone. “Put Your Wands Away. NOW!”

Reluctantly, wands slipped back into holsters. Harry looked over at Blaise, one eyebrow raised. When Blaise nodded, the Slytherins tucked their wands away as well.

Harry waved everyone to come a bit closer to the dais. “Professor Snape and his house members are here by my invitation. I trust them...”

“But they’re Slytherins!” Someone in the crowd shouted.

“They are students!” Harry snapped back. “Just like you and me. It’s time to put away the house rivalries. We’ve learned to work across house boundaries already. There isn’t a single squad here that consists of a single house! I asked Professor Snape here because, of all the teachers that I trust, he alone has intimate knowledge of Death Eater tactics and operation. He’s offered to share that knowledge with us and I’ve accepted.

Blaise and his fellow Slytherins will form a sixth squad with a slightly different mission than our own. His group has a lot of catching up to do and they can’t possibly do it in time we have, so they will have a different mission than everyone else’s. What I want to make clear here is that Blaise and his group are not supporters of the Dark Lord. They are here because they want to make a difference and their presence proves that not all Slytherins are bad. Make them welcome people.

Blaise if you will see me in a moment, I’ll give you holsters to hand out, along with the rings. Hermione also has an oath she’ll need you to swear.”

The tall Slytherin nodded at Harry, a slight smile playing about his lips.

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## Harry and Ginny...

Ginny was feeling a bit put out. Harry wasn't ignoring her, but the demands of school and training had seriously eaten into their time together. Dumbledore had told him about a hidden study lounge near the Room of Requirement, and she and Harry had taken to doing their homework there. It was quiet and few knew about it. The problem was there was always some sort of work to do.

Ginny had asked Harry for help with her charms essay. Harry was very good with charms and he didn't mind helping her. Being her OWL year, she had a big workload on top of everything else.

They sat close together, Harry reading her essay while she wrote it. She wanted to get this essay done so she and Harry could spend some time together.

Harry was having trouble concentrating. Ginny's essay was hard enough, but she had worn a perfume tonight that was distracting him. Ginny was scribbling another paragraph on her parchment when it happened. Harry leaned over, slid his arms around her and nibbled gently on her earlobe. She shivered delightfully. He moved a little lower to kiss the nape of neck and slid one hand up to cup her breast gently. She turned into him and kissed him passionately.

*I'll have to thank Lavender for this perfume!* She thought gleefully. *For Harry, this is aggressive behavior. Next, I want to borrow that book of hers.* Ginny knew Harry wouldn't allow them to do that, but according to Lavender the book described other things they could do.

Ginny felt Harry's hands reach for her, touching her, her last rational thought was, *Oh screw the charm essay, this is so much better!*

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## Chapter 12 Designs and Draco !

### Training with Dumbledore...

Harry continued to train solo, the difference now was that Dumbledore wanted to observe and advise him, so Harry often used free periods to train during the day. Harry was still becoming accustomed to the amount of power he was now tapping into, and as originally suspect, it was continuing to grow. Harry felt better about that; it meant that at least in power levels, Harry and Voldemort would probably be very close to being equal.

It was early March and Harry was getting frustrated. With the help of Ginny and Hermione, he had scoured scores of volumes in the library dealing with defense against the dark arts. The problem was that most defense techniques relied on Dark Art spells, which he was unable to use. In frustration, Harry had resorted to neutral spells, which were commonly used in wizard construction. Blasting spells designed to help in the construction of foundations or blowing holes in rock. Boring spells that could create a three-inch hole in solid rock up to ten meters deep. He even found a variation of a flame spell used to smelt ores.

These were all powerful spells, capable of dealing incredible damage, but they all had various drawbacks. Some required too much time to cast, some were very draining, and some had an effect that was spread out over too great an area. He wanted to help Hogsmeade, not flatten it to a pulp or turn it into Swiss cheese.

The real problem, Harry realized, was that he had taken the simulated opponents as far as he could. He knew he would eventually reach this point. That was why he kept trying to increase the number of opponents he could handle at one time. The opponents, no matter how hard he tried to improve them, were, in the final analysis, just simulations.

Since Harry's friends had the class period off, they joined him while he was training today. Although he was secretly convinced Ginny would join him anytime she could see him shirtless. He was in the arena area while they remained in the observation room. He was running through some warm up meditations trying to focus on his task when Dumbledore walked in, carrying a large tome.

Dumbledore conjured a small table to place the book on, and then turned to Harry.

"Harry, a moment if you will. I trust by now you realize what the inherent problems are with using these simulations?"

"Yes Headmaster. They have become predictable. The only reason I lose now is because I am overwhelmed by sheer numbers."

"Exactly Harry! Now, if I might make a suggestion, instead of multiple opponents today, how about a single opponent, which I shall control?"

Harry started. "I wasn't aware that was possible Sir."

"Oh, quite. If you'll just set up the opponent for me, I'll be ready to control it. I should warn you however, a human opponent is unpredictable, which means it's far more dangerous. I do promise not to use any spell that is too damaging."

Dumbledore drew his wand.

Harry's eyes narrowed suspiciously. *He's planning on sneaking something up on me.* He thought. *Stay loose and be ready for anything!*

His friends watched with interest.

Harry set up the opponent, this time making it look like Dumbledore. He activated the spectator shields and nodded to the Headmaster.

He barely had time to turn back to his opponent when he spotted an incoming curse. He rolled on his shoulder, heading for ground, and cast a sweeping hex. The fake Dumbledore sprang into the air and the hex missed its target. Continuing his roll, he was on his feet in time to see a ball of flame heading at him. Harry pitched sideways and returned a boomerang bludgeon at his opponent. The bludgeon blew through his opponent's shield and only narrowly clipped his opponent, spinning him around.

The fake Dumbledore grinned at him and started firing spells quickly. Harry started to combine both magical and physical defenses as he returned the spells, volley for volley. Shields glowed with each hit. He managed to get a second hit on his opponent, but it still wasn't enough to incapacitate him. He was himself hit with an arcing cutting hex that came down over the top of his shield. On more than one occasion, the spectator shield flared as rebounding spells hit it.

The duel finally ended when Dumbledore pulled a really nasty trick on him. Harry had fired a particularly nasty Tamping hex. It was really like multiple bludgeons. It was a wizard construction spell, used to tamp down gravel and dirt, making it hard packed.

The spell had barely left his hand when Ginny suddenly appeared in front of his target. Harry panicked and micro-jumped to her. He swung his arms around her, planning to micro-jump back, but his arms closed on nothing! Harry had barely a second to realize he had been tricked when he was slammed into the wall. His opponent had apparated out of the way! Harry slumped to the ground dazed; his back felt like it was on fire.

With the duel effectively over, the opponent and the spectator shields faded away. Pushing himself up with his arms, he eyed Dumbledore reprovingly. "That Sir, was cheating," he ground out.

Dumbledore chuckled before turning serious. "Tell me Harry, do you think Voldemort will play fair?"

Harry's eyes narrowed tightly. "Point taken Sir. I just wish it hadn't been so forcefully driven home."

He gasped and shook his head violently when the two girls tried to help him to his feet. "Don't..."

Ginny shot the Headmaster an accusing look.

Dumbledore eyed Harry speculatively for a moment. "Harry, use your magic to heal yourself. There will come a time in combat when you will need to know how to do this."

"But I don't have any healing potions..." He gasped.

"Not all healing comes from potions Harry. Concentrate on the greatest pain and use the magic to force it back."

*Great, he makes it sound so easy, meanwhile I'm the one that has to do the work.* Harry thought. *Concentrate on the pain, well that's easy enough to do, it's everywhere and kind of hard to ignore.* He snorted at his own wry thoughts.

Harry still lay propped up by his arms, his eyes screwed shut as he tried to follow Dumbledore's suggestions. He tapped into his magic and used it to batter back at his pain. Time and again, he'd gather his energy and slam it against the pain, pushing it further and further back. To the onlookers, Harry seemed motionless, but his body flared with the force of his magic.

His friends jumped when his eyes finally snapped open again. His face was no longer contorted by pain but his eyes glowed brightly in room. He stood slowly, as if he was expecting the pain to return at any moment. When he reached his full height, he looked bemused by what he had done. He hadn't made all of his pain go away, he still had a few cuts and bruises from the duel, but his back no longer hurt him.

"Bravo Harry! Well done. Combat healing of that magnitude is something you still need to practice and it should be used only in emergencies, but that was well done. Now come sit and we'll talk."

Harry walked over to the observation area and sat heavily in the chair. Between the duel and his self-healing, he needed a rest. Ginny worked on his cuts, healing them. Her eyes took on that glassy look again and he knew he'd have to distract her. Apparently, his naked torso affected her almost as much as hers affected him. Using legilimency he sent her a quick thought, a simple "Later Love, we'll study later."

Ginny's eyes widened as she looked at him. She smiled at him with her eyes and retook her seat.

Harry didn't use legilimency much as he didn't like its intrusive nature. But on a few occasions, he'd send Ginny a short message, usually when he wanted to say something to her that was too private to be shared with the people around them. The art kind of scared him. He knew one could use it to rip though an opponent's memory so he refused to study beyond the point of inserting a simple thought into someone nearby. To him, it was nearly as bad as a Dark Art discipline.

Harry turned his attention back to Dumbledore. The old wizard, twinkling with amusement, was watching Harry intently and Harry suddenly had the idea that Dumbledore knew exactly what had just taken place.

Finally Dumbledore decided to break the silence. "Harry, I've been aware of your search for spells you can use, and of Madam Pince's displeasure as you and your friends have romped through the restricted section like a natural disaster. I have brought you an old volume, one that was given to me a long time ago. I also noted that, as you and I dueled, Miss Granger's fingers would twitch in anticipation."

Turning to Hermione, his eyes still dancing, "Miss Granger, your love of books is legendary, and I daresay when the next edition of *Hogwarts: A History*, is published, there will be a chapter dedicated to you alone. I would caution you however, Miss Granger, books contain many lessons, but some of the most important lessons in life cannot be found in books."

Hermione was torn between pleasure over his praise, and his cautionary warning.

Extending his wand, he replicated the book so there were now three copies. "Now this is the Big Book of Light and Neutral Art Spells. I daresay you will find it easier looking through this than driving Madam Pince into an early retirement." He handed a copy to Hermione, Ginny and Harry.

Harry glanced at Ron who looked on, then shrugged. "No worries Harry. You, Ginny and 'Mione are the bookworm types. Besides, I can always borrow your copy."

Dumbledore turned back to Harry. "Starting with your next training session Harry, I'll be controlling your opponents for you. As you can see, it does make for a more dynamic and

realistic dueling situation. If you do well enough there, perhaps you and I might try sparring sometime soon.”

Harry gulped while the other three looked aghast. He was going to duel with Dumbledore?

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### **Here, there, everywhere...**

Harry lay on his bed, reading. In Defense class today, they had been given apparation manuals with the reduced age limits and their permits. They were supposed to undergo twenty hours of lecture time before even attempting to apparate, instead of the usual ten hours of lecture. The Ministry was insisting that the students be very carefully briefed on the topic as well as the laws involved.

Harry read his book; it was dry reading, the first section covering the applicable laws. He was thinking of tossing the book aside for the night, when he finally reached the theory portion of the text.

Apparation is the process whereby a witch or wizard can move physically from one location to another. A good apparationist can visualize his or her projected destination. With the destination firmly in mind, they focus their magic inwards, projecting themselves into their intended destination.

Harry placed his book down on his nightstand still open. He placed his glasses on the open book and lay back in his bed. It was getting late, and he might as well try to sleep.

He lay there for a while, staring at the ceiling. *It didn't sound all that hard. It didn't sound hard at all...*

Harry thought of places he knew well. He started to drift off, thinking about what he had read.

Then he vanished with a soft pop.

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### **Bad landing number 1...**

Remus sat on the couch by the fireplace; Tonks was getting them some drinks. She had certain designs on her husband this evening and she wanted him relaxed.

Tonks, wearing a filmy nightgown under her robe, was just entering the living room when there was a slight pop, and Harry, still in his pajamas, still in a prone position, and still nearly asleep, appeared about knee high in front of her.

Tonks screamed and pitched forward as she tripped over Harry, her drinks went arcing through the air heading straight for Remus. Harry woke with a start and thudded to the ground with a yell. Remus bolted up from the couch in time to receive an alcoholic shower.

Harry had been thrown from his bed, and someone was partially on top of him! He saw blurry shapes moving and, still in a sleep-induced state, panicked. Without even thinking about it he vanished again with a soft pop.

Tonks slowly picked herself up and turned to look at what she had tripped over. Remus came up behind her.

“Remus, what was that? I could’ve sworn I tripped over someone!”

Remus shook his head. “I’m not quite certain Tonks. I thought I saw Harry, but he was in his pajamas!”

“Maybe you better floo Dumbledore?”

“I think I will.”

---

### **Bad Landing #2...**

Harry’s next destination was even worse than the first. He had jumped in a panic and his destination was rather vague.

Arthur Weasley was just heading up to bed when there was a soft pop from the top of the stairs and a body came crashing down on him. The two of them continued to the bottom of the stairs, to land at Molly’s feet. Molly caught a glimpse of a pajama clad black haired figure just before it vanished with a soft pop.

Arthur groaned and lay there while Molly rushed to floo Hogwarts.

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### **Meanwhile back at Hogwarts...**

It was the strident sound of the braying elephants that alerted Albus Dumbledore that something was wrong. The alarm echoed throughout the castle. Dumbledore frowned; that alarm meant the apparation wards had been breached. He started to check his instruments to determine what was going on when the Floo flared to life. Remus and Tonks stepped into his office.

“Professor Dumbledore! It’s Harry!”

Before Dumbledore could even respond the floo flared again admitting Molly and Arthur.

Remus looked and smelled like he had bathed in gin, and Arthur walked with a noticeable limp.

Dumbledore was about to say something when Professor McGonagall called on the Floo, saying she needed him in the Gryffindor common room. Seeing his visitors she suggested they might want to come along.

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### **Hogwarts, we have a problem (just a few minutes earlier)...**

The alarms were still sounding and the students of Gryffindor were stumbling down into the common room. Many thought it was another attack. Most had their wands out and ready. The students were milling about in the common room when suddenly a motion drew everyone's attention.

Harry's return to Hogwarts was even more poorly planned than his trip to the Burrow, if such a thing was possible.

Harry reappeared over a couch, *twelve feet* over it. And, gravity being what it is, he dropped like a rock. He hit the couch and rebounded over the heads of the students present. No one had recognized him as yet, but several DA members, not willing to take chances, shot at the moving form as it sailed over their heads. Fortunately for Harry, only two actually hit him. Unfortunately for Harry, it was two of the most powerful witches in the school.

Harry landed in a crumpled heap on the floor near the boy's staircase. He was out cold as a result of dropping to the ground at Grimmauld Place, falling down the stairs in the Burrow and being hit by two Stupefy spells, one from Ginny and the other one from Hermione.

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### **Gryffindor Common Room...**

Dumbledore, Remus, Tonks and the Weasleys entered the Gryffindor common room to find Professor McGonagall, Ron, Ginny and Hermione there. On the couch lay Harry, a cool cloth against his forehead.

Harry fluttered his eye's open. "Well this isn't the infirmary. I guess that's something."

Ginny leaned down and put his glasses on him. He looked up at the faces peering down at him, and groaned. "I guess that wasn't a very vivid and very embarrassing nightmare?"

Dumbledore asked him to explain what he had been doing. He related the tale about reading his apparation manual and then going to sleep thinking about what the theory section had said. "I started to fall asleep Headmaster. After that, things became sort of crazy I guess..."

Remus snorted. "I'll say. You appeared in our living room, tripped Tonks who split our drinks all over me..." Tonks looked to be trying very hard not to laugh. She was holding her sides. Molly was hiding a smile behind her hand.

Arthur picked up the tale from that point. "Once you left there, you appeared at the top of the stairs in the Burrow and slid all the way down, knocking me over in the process. Then we both fell the rest of the way."

McGonagall backed away, holding her sides and desperately trying to stifle her laughter, as Ginny continued. "You appeared in the common room, right next to the ceiling. You landed on the couch and bounced. At that point, 'Mione and I both hit you with stupefies. Then you landed by the boy's stairs..."



He didn't know what to say. Ron was rolling on the floor laughing. Ginny still looked mortified that she had stunned him. Hermione looked upset. Dumbledore was chuckling and the others were in various states of hysterical laughter. McGonagall was wiping tears from her eyes and trying to contain herself.

Harry struggled to his feet and stood there, glaring at them all. "Well, since you're all going to be laughing at me, I might as well go off to bed!" He swayed slightly, lifted his nose and tried to make a stately, dignified exit for the Boy's dorm as the howls of laughter increased in volume behind him.

He was stopped by a voice coming from behind him. "But Harry, you can't apparate into or out of Hogwarts. It says so in *Hogwarts: A History*." Hermione called after him.

He decided that wasn't worthy of replying to so he continued up the stairs.

Harry, his dignity intact, never noticed until the next morning that, during last night's journey, he had ripped his pajama bottoms, exposing one buttock to the open air.

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### **The next morning...**

The next morning at breakfast, Harry stuck his nose in his new spell book, determined to ignore the snickering looks from the teachers and his friends. It probably would have worked except for one thing.

Dumbledore stopped at his table. "Harry, I must say that was rather good last night. I'm awarding your house ten points for pointing out that the anti-apparation wards have holes in them, and I'm giving you this book of household charms. I expect you'll find the section on clothing repair most informative."

"As it turns out Harry, your accidental apparation last night did allow me to pinpoint some flaws in our anti-apparation wards. They were quite small, but big enough for a person to squeeze through. I think we've fixed the problem, however. So you'll be comforted to know there shouldn't be any more apparation accidents. Wards do break down over time. I should check them more often."

With his eyes dancing like crazy, Dumbledore headed up to the main table.

Harry wanted to slide under the table and hide there. By now most of the school knew of his little trip and his exposure.

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### **Snape's apartment, after a DA meeting...**

Serena and Severus had returned from attending a DA meeting. In the previous meetings, Severus had lectured the members on Death Eater Tactics and operations. This meeting had been the first time the two of them had the opportunity to see some of Harry's new techniques in use.

“Can you believe it? Students? They’re doing things unheard of in defensive magic! And right under our noses, I might add! How did a bunch of students come up with ideas that trained Aurors haven’t thought of? It’s amazing to me...”

Serena Snape had watched her husband pace, raving about the DA, for the last half hour. At first, she’d thought he was angry. Eventually, she realized he was shocked and a bit overwhelmed by what the students had managed to accomplish on their own.

She now sat in an armchair in the living room, watching her husband pace circles around her, the coffee table and the couch, with delight. Usually she was the one to pace and she found the role reversal quite amusing.

She had tried to gain his attention ten minutes ago, but he had ignored her totally. But now he was starting to repeat himself, so she tried once again.

“...movable shields? Who’s ever head of such a thing?” Severus was exclaiming for the second time.

“Don’t you think...?” Serena tried.

“And some of them without wands? I’m telling you, it shouldn’t be...”

“Obviously it is, Severus. But I think you should remember...”

“I know their not children anymore, but still! And right under the Headmaster’s nose?”

“Severus, will you listen to me for...”

“And did you see the way they moved? The coordination and ...”

Serena sighed and said quietly, “Severus, I’m pregnant.”

“...so efficient in their....WHAT?”

She grinned when he whirled around, tripped on the coffee table and fell heavily to the arm of the couch. Taking in his stunned expression, she started laughing.

“Oh Gods, if you could see the look on your face!” She gurgled, trying to contain her merriment.

“Serena...what? Pregnant? But... I don’t understand. The contraceptive charm...” He broke off, ashen faced and shaking.

“I was kidding. I needed something to get your attention.”

“Kidding? You mean...?”

“I’m not pregnant,” she said with a soft smile at her panicked husband.

He went limp and slid down to a couch cushion in an undignified heap. Raking fingers through his long hair, he scowled at her. "That wasn't funny!"

"To you, perhaps. I found it quite humorous," she replied, her eyes dancing with glee. "Besides, you were starting to repeat yourself," she added as she stood up.

Conjuring a pot of tea and two cups, she filled one and handed it to him. Filling the other, she sat down beside him, grinning as he sat up and sent her another glare.

"Impudent wench," he muttered.

"Slytherin snake," she replied, mildly.

"So, you have my attention. What was so important?" He asked before sipping his tea.

"Are you over your shock, then?"

"For now," he replied, wryly.

"Well, now that we've seen what sort of things the DA is capable of, don't you think it's time to tell Harry about the Cruciatus potion?" She asked, placing her teacup on the table.

"Good Gods, I hadn't thought of that," Severus exclaimed. "After it was tested, I only thought of the benefit to the Aurors and Order members. I never thought of the students!"

"You can't be omnipotent all the time," she said, with an airy wave of her hand. "Even the mighty Professor Snape is allowed to miss the obvious from time to time."

"I'll ask him to come 'round tomorrow evening then, shall I?" He asked, ignoring her jab.

"That works for me," she replied, taking his teacup from him and placing it on the table. Turning back to him, she grinned, leaned in and whispered, "What say we work on your contraceptive charm, hmm?"

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## **The Second Vision...**

It had been bothering Harry for a while now. He had tried to put it off, but it was looming over him. He felt guilty for ignoring it, but every time he looked at Ginny, she reminded him about it. It wasn't so much that Ginny reminded him of the Hogwarts Battle. It was more that she represented what he wanted on the other side of that dreaded event.

Harry knew things were coming to a climax and he had to prepare. He had to be ready to divulge information if they survived Hogsmeade. Harry lay in his bed pondering. He couldn't sleep. Finally, he did the only thing he could think of. He pulled out his Pensieve, closed the curtains around his bed, and then cast a silencing charm.

Pulling the memory, he placed it into the Pensieve. First, he reviewed the memory as it was originally given to him.

*The light flared again and suddenly Harry was over what could only be Hogwarts. The Gryffindor Tower had collapsed. The castle was aflame and the courtyard was littered with bodies. Even from this height, he could make out who they were. Professors McGonagall and Sprout were on the ground surrounded by a number of first and second year students. Ron! Ron laid covering Hermione, protecting her to the last. Ginny? GINNY! Her body lay near the grand entrance to the school, naked and bloody. Harry choked back a sob, while that same evil laughter echoed in the distance.*

*No help here. There are no clues from what I can see, I'll have to enter it frozen,* He thought.

He really didn't want to enter this memory. Unlike the Hogsmeade vision, this was too personal, too close to home for him. His hand trembled as he froze the Pensieve and entered the memory.

Like the last time, he floated gently to the ground. He tried to avert his eyes from the bodies of his friends, especially Ginny, but he couldn't. The visions tore at him. Like a moth to a flame he was drawn to where Hermione and Ron lay. Harry was forced to smile a sad smile. Ron had not only given Hermione her promise ring but from the look of it, an engagement ring as well.

Stepping over debris, he walked to where Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout lay.

*Hmmm that second year... Shari Something-or-other... she's a first year Gryffindor now.* He thought. *That is a start. Next year for sure.* Bending over, he could see her sprawled out; a well-placed Reducto had blown out a major piece of her back. He shuddered and backed away. Turning away, he headed for Ginny.

Harry cringed. Nearby lay a student with an open notebook. The robes suggested a third year student. And there was Ginny...

He moved closer. He stood for a long time staring at her form, before turning away to look at the book the third year had dropped. *Hmmm... potions homework? The dreamless sleep potion? I wonder what part of the year they teach that?* He was having a lot of trouble concentrating. The image of Ginny haunted him and he couldn't get it out of his mind.

Harry pulled himself from the vision. He trembled and tried to clear his mind of her broken, beaten body. *Oh Merlin, I can't do this by myself!*

He opened the curtains, grabbed his robe and cast a holding charm over his Pensieve before placing it in the pocket of his robe. He knew he HAD to talk to someone about this tonight. But first, he had something even more important to do.

Harry transformed into Wings and vanished from the boy's dorm. He appeared a moment later in Ginny's. He glided silently to her bed and transformed back. Harry knew exactly what he had to do. It was instinctual at this point. Closing the curtains to her bed and casting a silencing charm, he swept Ginny into his arms, still asleep. He pulled her to himself, holding her tightly.

Ginny woke up to a feeling that was both wonderful and terrifying. She was being held, tightly. She looked up in the darkness to spot the soft green light coming from Harry's eyes. "Harry?"

"Promise me you'll stay safe Gin... Promise me you won't die!" He hissed.

“Harry? What are you...?”

Harry cut her off by crushing his lips to hers. This wasn't passion, this wasn't a chaste kiss, and it wasn't sexual. His overwhelming need to keep her safe, made him want to pull her into himself and keep her there. Ginny didn't understand, all she knew was her man was kissing her, trying to relay some need to her. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back.

Finally, he released her. He reached across and touched her gently, “I had to see you were still ok Gin. I'm sorry I woke you.”

“What was it Harry? A nightmare?”

“Yeah Gin, just a nightmare. Now that I know you're alright, I'll let you get back to sleep.” Harry cringed back from telling her the truth; although lying to her made him feel terrible all over again.

“Harry?” Suddenly Ginny turned very shy. “Would you like to stay?”

He grabbed her again. “Oh Merlin, I'd love to Gin, but I can't, not tonight. Please understand. I want you so bad Gin, I need you, but not tonight. I promise soon. I promise you a lifetime of it Gin.”

Ginny searched his eyes, she could see a new pain there, and he wasn't rejecting her. Something was bothering him more than a simple nightmare, but she could also sense he was trying to protect her from whatever it was.

Harry stepped away from her. “I love you Ginevra Weasley. I'll give my life to keep you safe,” he whispered. Then he transformed into Wings and vanished.

Wings appeared far above the castle, spiraling tight, his song taking on a distressed note. He was a little comforted by his time with Ginny, but he still had to share the information with someone. Who? Dumbledore? Not his friends that much was sure. Remus? Who? WHO?

Suddenly Fawkes appeared. *What troubles you Fledging?*

*Fawkes! I have information I must share with someone, but I don't know who to share it with. I thought assuming my phoenix form would calm me, but it isn't working. This is just too much tonight.*

*Alas, Albus is not yet ready to hear what you need to tell him. But you have others in this place you trust, as you were once told. Trust your friends. Seek the brewers Fledging. They are ready to hear your news.*

*My Thanks Fawkes! I will seek them now.*

Wings vanished from sight and reappeared in front of the Snape's quarters. The change from the calming presence of his phoenix back to his human form was enough to trigger a panic attack in Harry. As soon as he was human again, he felt the impact of that awful vision again. His friends, HIS GINNY!

He pulled the Pensieve from his pocket and with a feeling of desperation he knocked...

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### **Late Night, Snape's Private Quarters...**

The knocking on the door was loud enough to wake the dead. As Severus threw on a robe, grabbed his wand from the bedside table and headed for the apartment door, Serena rose from the bed grumpily.

*Who on earth would be pounding on our door at this hour of the night?* She asked herself, glancing at the clock. *It's after one in the morning, for Merlin's sake!*

Severus wasn't happy either. As he marched through the living room, he stubbed his toe on an end table. With an angry flick of his wand, the candles were lit.

He hobbled to the door, muttering, "If the castle isn't on fire, I'm going to transfigure the person at the door into a jack-ass, I swear!"

He yanked the door open with a scowl. "What the hell is...Harry?"

The young man standing before him was a wreck. His body was covered in sweat and his hands trembled so badly he nearly dropped what he held in them. Seeing the look of anguish in his eyes, Severus simply stepped back to allow him in.

Harry darted in and ran to the living room. Stopping, he looked around in panic. Whirling, he faced Severus and choked, "Your wife? I need you both to see."

Walking to him, Severus placed a hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze before calling for Serena. He was unwilling to leave Harry alone in this condition.

When Serena entered the room, she bit back the caustic remark she'd been ready with and took in the scene before her. *Oh Gods, what now?*

"Harry?" Serena asked gently. "What is it?"

"Can we go into the dining room?" Harry asked in a rush. "You'll need to be seated for this and I..." He broke off suddenly, and sent her a pleading look.

"Of course. This way, then," she said, leading him into the dining room.

Watching as Harry put a Pensieve down on the table, she glanced at her husband with concern. He returned her look and waved her into a chair.

When Harry sat down, Severus and Serena pulled out the chairs on either side of his tense form and sat. They watched the young man stare at the Pensieve in the lengthening silence. He didn't move. He didn't even blink.

Feeling the goose bumps rise on her flesh, Serena finally reached out and took Harry's hand. When he didn't respond, she reached over, grasped his chin gently and turned him to face her.

“Harry, what is it?” She asked softly, the pain in his eyes tearing at her heart.

“It’s the vision I didn’t show anyone... it’s so horrible... I took another look at it tonight. Please, when do the third years learn about dreamless sleep potions? It’s important...”

Serena leaned back for a moment. “Why do you need...?”

“It’s important! It’s a key. It’s the only clue I have and I can’t go back into... into that...” he pointed a trembling finger at the Pensieve.

“Alright Harry. I’ll check my lesson plan,” she said, before summoning her course outline to her and flipping through it.

Severus watched the two. His curiosity piqued by the Pensieve.

“Harry? Generally the Dreamless Sleep potion is taught between the middle of March and the middle of April. Does that help?”

Harry slumped in defeat. “I had hoped you would have a finer date than that,” he said softly.

Severus broke in. “Harry, did you search the entire memory?”

Harry shuddered violently. “I couldn’t, it’s... its too bad.”

Severus shot Serena a glance before speaking again. “Harry, how about if we went in with you? That way, all of us can search the memory. You won’t be alone.”

Harry flinched visibly, like he was avoiding a blow. Serena reached over and took his hand again. “Harry, we’ll be with you the whole time. You’ll be safe.”

Harry looked defeated. Numbly, he nodded in agreement. The three clustered around the Pensieve. Harry released the holding charm on it and then played the sequence forward to where he wanted it to stop.

The light flared again and suddenly Harry was over what could only be Hogwarts. The Gryffindor Tower had collapsed. The castle was aflame and the courtyard was littered with bodies. Even from this height he could make out who they were. Professors McGonagall and Sprout were on the ground surrounded by a number of first and second year students. Ron! Ron lay covering Hermione, protecting her to the last. Ginny? GINNY! Her body lay near the grand entrance to the school, naked and bloody. Harry choked back a sob while that same evil laughter echoed in the distance.

With a jerky nod, he signaled the others to join him.

They landed softly in the courtyard of Hogwarts. The damage was incredible. Serena gasped and Severus reached out to take her hand. In this place of death, the touch of a living person was a most welcome comfort.

Harry felt dead. He pointed them over to where Professor Sprout and Professor McGonagall lay in the dirt. He led them in that general direction, stopping at one particular body.

“Shari. She’s a first year Gryffindor now. But she’s wearing a second year stripe, so this is next year.”

Serena looked around. From here she could see Hagrid’s hut burning. Her eyes narrowed when she spotted Ron and Hermione lying together.

Harry pointed at another body closer to the Entrance Hall. “I found a note book over there. Potions. It ended with the Dreamless Sleep potion.”

Severus looked at Harry when the young man refused to move any further. “Harry, we’re with you. Nothing can hurt you now.”

“We can’t do this without you,” Serena added gently.

Harry nodded jerkily.

The three approached the third year. Severus bent down to look at the book and noticed a letter, partially sticking out of the book, with a date visible. April 7th. He showed the letter to his wife.

*Harry should have noticed that. How did he miss it?* He thought. Both he and Serena turned to face Harry, she to show him the note, and he to ask how he had missed the letter.

Harry wasn’t paying any attention to them. His eyes were focused on a figure just outside the Entrance Hall. His limbs were trembling and he shook his head in violent denial at the sight before him. Serena and Severus turned to see what he was looking at.

Serena swayed and grabbed for Severus. Severus’ gaze darkened with a terrible anger. Ginny Weasley lay in front of the Entrance Hall. She was naked and bloody, and it was obvious that she had died as a result of abuse, not some mercifully quick spell.

Severus looked at Harry one last time before he invoked the spell to eject everyone from the Pensieve. Severus and Serena sat in their chairs around the table, trying to absorb what they’d just seen.

Harry didn’t look at them. He stared at the table top, mumbling, “I have to beat him... I have to beat him...”

Serena met her husband’s eyes and mouthed, “Living room.”

When Severus nodded, stood and led an unresisting Harry out, she followed. Taking a short detour, she stopped in the potion lab and grabbed a bottle from a shelf by the door before rejoining them.

Severus had helped Harry to the couch. He’d tried speaking to the young man, but Harry remained unresponsive. Frustrated, he stood when Serena entered the room. Moving towards her with a concerned frown, he looked at the bottle in her hand questioningly.



“Dreamless Sleep,” she murmured.

He nodded. Perhaps sleep was best for now.

“What about an Obliviate?” She asked.

“I’m not sure taking the memory will help him, Serena. He needs this information. Besides, you know I dislike playing with someone’s mind.”

“Not the whole memory, Severus, just the part with his friends, with Ginny. We’ll ask him first, of course. If he agrees, you’ll have to do it. I don’t have the same control you do with memory charms.”

Severus raked his fingers through his hair and scowled. He hated toying with people’s memories, but Serena was right. If the young man agreed, it might be for the best. “Fine, but I’m not sure how to get through to him right now. He’s a mess.”

They both moved back to Harry and sat; Severus on the coffee table in front of him, Serena on the couch next to him. She placed the potion on the table in front of her, turned and took Harry’s hand.

“Harry? You need to pay attention now. We can help you, but you need to listen. Harry? Come back to us now,” Serena said gently, repeatedly, while stroking his hand.

As his wife murmured to him, Severus watched him closely. Harry’s far away, pain filled eyes flickered a few times before finally focusing on his own black eyed gaze.

“Harry?” Severus asked, softly.

“Yes, Professor?” Came the emotionless reply.

“Do you remember what happened?”

Harry jerked suddenly, flinching away and closed his eyes tightly. Severus took his other hand and squeezed it. “It’s all right. We’re here. We can help. But you need to listen. Can you do that?”

At the Professor’s calming words, Harry opened his eyes. Meeting Severus’ gaze once more, he nodded.

“You know that what you saw isn’t what will be. Only what might be.” When the young man tried to interrupt, Severus’ voice hardened as he continued. “Ginny, your friends, they aren’t dead. And they won’t be! You’re not alone in this fight, Harry. But you can’t push them away. You need them. Draw your strength from them, to fight for them and for yourself.”

As the Professor’s calm, strong words sank in, Harry started to relax. Ginny wasn’t dead. Ron, Hermione...they were all in Gryffindor Tower, safe. Looking into the eyes of the man before him, looking for any hint of deception, he felt his locket warm. Taking a shuddering breath, he nodded once more.

“Harry,” Serena said, drawing the young man’s gaze. “We can help you. Severus can remove the memory of Ginny and your friends. Not the whole memory, as it’s too important for you to lose. But the most painful parts can be taken away. Once it’s done, we’ll explain to you that a portion of the memory was removed because of the pain it caused you. But it has to be your decision.”

*Mum, Dad? Harry thought, closing his eyes. I need your help with this. You’ve told me I can trust them. I believe you, but I don’t know what to do. It seems like an easy solution, doesn’t it? Maybe too easy? I don’t know. I don’t want to see it again, but I can’t stop replaying it over and over. Gods, Ginny! Mum, Dad? Sirius? Should I let the memory be Obliviated?*

He waited for a moment, hoping for a response. When the locket warmed, he sagged in relief. He wouldn’t have to see Ginny’s broken body again. Opening his eyes once more, he looked at Professor Snape.

“Sir, I know you don’t like doing this. But I think I need it. Please, take the memory,” he said with quiet conviction.

An hour later, Severus and Serena entered their bedroom, hoping for a few hours of sleep. After removing the memory, they had escorted Harry to the Gryffindor common room and administered the Dreamless Sleep potion. While the most disturbing images had been removed from Harry’s memory, what was left wasn’t pleasant. A good night’s sleep would help.

As Serena slipped off her robe, she noticed her husband’s scowl.

“What is it?” She asked.

“I just realized that I spent the last few hours comforting James Potter’s son,” he replied in puzzlement, dropping to the bed and laying back.

“Severus Snape! Don’t you dare start that again,” Serena exclaimed, climbing onto the bed and kneeling beside him.

“Serena, you don’t understand...” Severus started to explain.

“Oh, I understand more than you think!” She replied, furiously. “You still can’t see beyond the boy’s father! What the hell is wrong with you, you bloody man?” Leaning over, she shook her finger in his face. “If you do anything to hurt that boy, you’ll pay for it, Severus. I’m serious! I won’t allow your past with his father to cause him more pain!”

Grabbing her shaking finger, he sat up quickly, rolled her over and pinned her to the bed, hissing, “Would you listen to me? Merlin woman, it’s a wonder you can hear anything the way you yammer on all the time!”

Glaring, she remained quiet.

“For five years that boy has annoyed me. And not just because of whom his father was. That’s not something I can just let go of over night! In the last year, I’ve been able to ignore it. Tonight I realized that, for the last few months, I haven’t had to ignore it because it wasn’t there any longer!

Then tonight, when he showed up...Gods, Serena, I'm not good with young people. You know that! Yet I found myself wanting to comfort him?"

Shoving himself off her, he rolled to his back and stared at the ceiling. "I wasn't angry, Serena," he continued quietly. "I was worried. Worried about a boy who stopped being just 'James' son' months ago. I've gone soft, that's what it is. Merlin!"

"You haven't gone soft. You're just learning to let go, that's all," Serena replied, curling into his side. "And it's about time too, I might add. Don't worry; your first years will still be terrified of you. You're a right of passage through Hogwarts's. If the students can survive you, they can survive anything!"

When he grunted in response, she chuckled, pulled the blankets over them both and tucked her head under his chin.

When she murmured her goodnight, he kissed the top of her head and sighed. *Gods, I AM going soft.*

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### **Lunch the next day...**

Harry had slept in late. Serena Snape had told him not to worry about sleeping in, as they would inform his teachers that he might miss class.

Harry got up just before noon. He vaguely remembered Ron trying to wake him. He took a quick shower, changed into some clean clothes then he head down to the Great Hall for lunch.

Joining his friends he started filling his plate when Ginny stopped him.

"Harry, you owe me an explanation for last night." She looked at him sternly.

"Your right Ginny, I do owe you an explanation. But I'm afraid I can only give you a piece of it." Noting her look he added hastily, "I'm not going to hold anything back from you guys, but the fact is, certain parts I don't remember and don't want to remember. I let Professor Snape obliviate some of my memory last night."

Ron dropped his fork, while both Ginny and Hermione looked stunned. "YOU DID WHAT?" Ron exclaimed, "Are you insane?"

"Ron! Keep your voice down!" Harry hissed at him, looking mad. "I didn't do it because I thought it would be fun. I LET him do it me. I agreed to it! I needed it."

Lowering his voice, he continued. "Look, using the Pensieve, I took myself into the one vision I haven't shown anyone. I needed to get some idea of a time frame. I now have the information I needed. I came to your room last night Gin, because something I saw upset me a lot. I needed to reassure myself that you were ok.

Then I took the Pensieve and showed the memory to the Snapes. I don't remember exactly what I saw in that, but when we were done, I felt like I had died. They helped me Ron. He Obliviated

parts of the memory and I let him do it. I don't want to remember what I saw. I've got what I need, and no one else is going to see that memory, except perhaps, Dumbledore. Trust me on this Ron, you don't want to see that vision."

Ginny placed a hand on his arm. He looked at her, and then he grabbed her tightly. "I just wanted to make sure you were safe Ginny," he whispered in her ear.

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### **Ideas and Revelations...**

Harry sat quietly in the library a few days later. Something had been bothering him since before Valentines Day. Thumbing through his notebook, he happened on sketch of Ginny's Heart Shaped crystal and he froze. Could it be?

Thumbing through his notes, he started checking. Yes, the crystal within a crystal would provide several interesting possibilities. Sure, they were much harder to make, but the combination of the matrices would allow him to invoke the Protean bond in ways it wasn't designed to! The mark could be used as a receiver for all sorts of magic if he used the proper crystal structures. The only problem he could see was that there was an inherent weakness where the crystals met. That meant power might be a problem. The crystal might be limited in this use. Flipping to an empty page, he started to write furiously, occasionally pausing to summon a book he needed.

It was near curfew and he had been working nonstop until Madam Pince insisted he leave. Scowling, he left the library and went straight to the Room of Requirement.

He spent the entire night working on this new idea. He summoned volume after volume to him, checking his references and putting the concepts to paper.

Harry paused and read his notes. It should work! He quickly pushed his notebook over to one side and stood pacing. How to test it though? How? He stopped. *Yes! That might work*, he thought. Sitting down once more, he began work on a test crystal.

He left the room of requirement an hour later, surprised to see it was morning. Where had the time gone?

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### **Testing 1 2 3...**

Harry walked into the Great Hall at breakfast and looked around carefully.

*YES! Now to see if this works like I hope*, he thought.

Spotting his friends, he walked over to them. Instead of sitting next to Ginny, he sat next to Hermione. Ginny frowned and Hermione looked at him curiously. He motioned for them to lean closer.

"I want each of you to keep an eye on our resident Death Eaters. I want to test something. Watch them for reactions." He whispered.

Harry pulled out an oblong crystal from his pocket. It was a translucent green with a strange pink interior and within that, something dark. He held it in the palm of his hand and his hand glowed slightly.

He stopped and looked at the three of them.

“Michael Corner is laughing,” Ron reported.

“So is Marietta Edgecombe,” Ginny said.

“Pansy is trying to stifle a giggle,” Hermione concluded.

“Ok, that’s the first test; let me try a little more power.”

His hand flared a little brighter this time. His friends reported the same results.

“OK, I don’t want to make them suspicious, but I need to try a little more power.”

His hand flared again, more brightly than before. Suddenly, the crystal grew very hot. He gasped in pain and hastily dropped it on the table. It had turned completely black and smoked a little. He held his hand with his other, the blisters already forming. He hissed in pain and shook his head.

“Oh well. I’d hoped the matrix would be able to handle more power, but it’s too unstable.”

Ginny grabbed his burned hand and started healing it. He smiled at her gratefully.

Hermione looked at Harry suspiciously. “Harry, just what was that all about?”

He used his free hand to pull out his notebook. Flipping to the right page, he slid it over to her. “I’m too tired to try explaining it ‘Mione. Just read. I started working on this yesterday, worked all night on it actually.”

Hermione looked at the open page before. Spotting the title, she frowned and read.

*Using embedded complex crystalline structures to  
Force the Protean Mark to act as a receiver for standard magic  
By H. J. Potter*

*Using a combination of crystalline structures, it may be possible to force the mark, created by the Protean Charm, to act as a receiver for the effects of ordinary magic. The core of this concept requires the essence of the particular mark to be incorporated within a series of embedded crystals (See Fig 1.) I foresee the possibility of using this complex structure to send low power magics, such as charms, directly to the mark of anyone within the appropriate distance.*

*There are several significant disadvantages to this concept. One cannot send high-powered spells through the complex structure. The interface between crystals is inherently weak. Additionally, because of the power limitations, the range is limited to probably less than 100 meters.*

*Creating such a complex structure required the incorporation of an existing dark detector that had been reshaped to conform to the necessary shape and size parameters. The dark detector provides the “essence” needed and acts as the core of the structure tying it to a specific protean mark...*

Hermione whipped her head up to glare at Harry. He had done it to her again! She wanted to stamp her foot and scream! She was about to tear into him until she noticed that Harry was snoring gently next to her, his head dipping slowly down to the empty plate before him.

She snapped the notebook shut angrily and looked over to Ginny. In a steely voice she said, “It’s a good thing he’s your man. If I didn’t love him like a brother, I’d kill him now.” With that she stormed away from them, marching up to the head table and leaving Ginny and Ron looked puzzled. Harry snored on.

She stopped in front of Professor McGonagall. “Professor... that... oh... that boy... I want to... he’s done it again!”

Professor McGonagall looked over the table at her favorite student. “Calm yourself, Miss Granger. Who has done what? Tell me what the problem is please.”

“He’s done it again Professor! Harry! Look! He did this without even telling me!”

She opened his notebook and thrust it at McGonagall. Minerva read a bit, and then placed a hand on Dumbledore’s arm, interrupting his conversation with Professor Sprout. He leaned over and glanced down at the notebook, then raised an eyebrow.

“It seems our Mr. Potter has been busy again. Where is he?” He looked up and quickly spotted the quiescent Harry, snoring at the Gryffindor table.

In a hushed tone, Hermione said, “He said he was up all night doing that Sir. He came in here a little while ago with a new crystal type I’ve never seen before and ran a few tests, causing three certain students to laugh. I can’t believe he went off and did this without at least telling me about it.”

“Hermione... you are truly the smartest witch we’ve seen in a long time, but Harry didn’t do this to offend you or make you angry. He gets a burst of inspiration and his own determination will not let him let go of it until he’s figured it out. He is not trying to compete with you,” Dumbledore soothed, before continuing. “In a way, it’s more tied to artistic talent than pure intelligence, my dear. I often wonder. If it hadn’t been for the drawings he’s been making, would he have ever come up with these ideas?”

Her anger deflated. “Oh, I know that Professor, it’s just so frustrating. He runs off and comes up with these wonderful ideas, but still likes to check his homework against mine.”

“He truly does need your help Hermione. He is a very capable wizard, quite smart in his own way. But he’s concentrated his efforts on those aspects of our world that directly impact his life, whereas, you have a driving thirst to learn all you can. Perhaps someday, when this war is over, he will have the same thirst my dear. For now however, I for one am glad he’s maintaining his focus.

Let him get a few hours sleep before you wake him. We'll meet tonight in my office to discuss this latest development. In the meantime, I'll make some copies of this latest idea of his. I'd suggest you and your friends help him get to bed for now and have Ronald wake him at noon." Dumbledore told her.

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### **Headmaster's office, Hogwarts...**

Later that evening, a very tired Harry, with Ginny in tow, entered the Headmasters office. McGonagall, Flitwick, both Snapes and Hermione were present. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow over Ginny's presence, but waved them in anyway.

"Ah Harry. We've just been going over your work, but are you sure you want Miss Weasley here tonight?" asked Dumbledore.

"Yes Sir. To be honest, I'm rather tired tonight and I don't think I'll be of much use to anyone. I brought Ginny here because she's wearing the inspiration for this latest work and well... I didn't think she will part with it willingly." Turning to her, he asked, "Would you show the Professors the necklace I gave you for Valentine's Day please?"

Ginny took off her necklace and passed it to Professor McGonagall to examine before it was passed on.

"Ginny's necklace contains no magical properties, but it's what gave me the idea. I built the ruby, and then built the diamond right around it. It's been bugging me since the day I made her necklace. Previously, I had been fusing crystals together, like placing building blocks one on top of another. The idea of putting one or more inside another changes the dynamics of how the crystals work."

As Harry continued to speak, the necklace was passed from one Professor to another until it got to Dumbledore, who took an extra few minutes to look it over.

"Two things became immediately apparent to me when I was looking at this. Because the stones are not fused together, the amount of power the matrix can handle is very limited, probably to low energy charms. Its range is limited as well. What I found more interesting is something I haven't tried yet. I think anyone can power one of these crystals Sir, probably easier than I can." He shrugged ending with, "This is one time that having too much power isn't a good thing."

Dumbledore handed the necklace and Harry's notebook to Ginny. She handed the necklace to Harry, then turned around and lifted the back of her hair. Harry smiled and put it back onto her.

Watching their actions, Dumbledore chuckled. "I think that necklace has more power than you think, Harry. At least it does for Miss Weasley, as she seems to be able to control you with it.

I can see you're still tired, so why don't you and Miss Weasley return to your common room. The rest of us can discuss this in some detail, and Miss Granger can share our ideas with you in the morning. Perhaps tomorrow you might be able to make us one of these new crystals to work with?"

Harry nodded at that, trying to hide a yawn. "Yes Sir, tomorrow. If I tried tonight, I'd probably fall asleep."

After Harry and Ginny left, Dumbledore looked at those left. "Well? Comments?"

Hermione looked ready to burst, so Dumbledore nodded for her to start.

"Sir, I haven't had much time to read Harry's paper, but given the low powered nature of this new idea, I've looked at what charms could possibly be of use. Basically, they fall into two categories - useful and non-useful. Of the useful, since it's doubtful this can be used as a weapon, it seems to me that there are several tracking charms which might be helpful..."

The meeting lasted several more hours before breaking up. Everyone thought they needed more time to digest this latest idea of Harry's.

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### **Slytherin Common Room, Late night, end of March...**

Draco Malfoy sat in a dim corner of the Slytherin Common room. The past two months had been a living hell for him. He had received several owls from his father, threatening to offer him to his master as a target dummy. The nightly detentions with Filch had been degrading, and then there was his time spent with Dumbledore.

*That man is fucking bonkers! He thought savagely. First he made me write long essays on the rise of mudblood power, and then a comparative essay on the power of the Wizarding world versus the muggle world.*

The last essay had been a real eye opener for Draco. No one had ever told him that muggles had weapons so powerful they could destroy the world. Even Voldemort couldn't do that.

But all that paled when he thought about the humiliation he had received from his own housemates! No one cared that he was a Malfoy anymore. He was a subject of laughter and mockery now. Even the first years laughed at him. Openly laughed at him!

*Damn them all! He raged. I'll find a way to show them that no one laughs at a Malfoy! I'll make them sit up and take notice. I'll teach them to fear the name of Draco Malfoy somehow...*

"Draco?"

Glancing up, he nearly growled. "What do you want, Pansy? Come to laugh like the others?"  
Damn her. She was wearing the same silver robe, belted loose enough to show...skin? *Now what is she playing at? Stupid bitch! It's her fault I'm in this position. Why did I listen to her?*

"No Draco, I can feel how badly you're hurting and I've come to offer you a chance to redeem yourself. I'm here to help you get back on the good side of our master... If you're nice to me, that is."



“Oh? In case you haven’t noticed Pansy, they won’t let me have a wand for more than six hours a day, and my father refuses to send me another. There’s little I can do without one,” he said, sarcastically.

She laughed huskily. “Ah Draco, you underestimate me. But then, you always did.”

“If you have something to say, do so. I tire of your games.”

“Games? Oh, this is no game, Draco. My plan will allow you to rejoin your family with honor. People will fear you once again. Your father, and the Dark Lord will be proud!” She said, fiercely.

“I’m watched, Pansy. You know that. Dumbledore would...”

“Dumbledore is a fool!” She hissed, sliding closer. “Listen well, Draco. When I am through, Dumbledore will be gone. And so will we!” Kneeling before him, she placed her hands on his knees and looked into his eyes. *He’s interested, but need a bit more twisting*, she thought

“Do you want payment for all that’s been taken from you?” She asked.

“Don’t ask foolish questions, Pansy. You know I do.”

“I can give you the means, you know.”

“How? And how much more will it cost me? You’re part of the reason I’m in this mess!”

“So I told you to kill the mudblood in front of Potter and his friends? Come now Draco, you did that yourself. You should have waited, and you know it.”

Pounding a fist on the arm of his chair, he glared at her. No matter how much he wished to deny what she said, he knew it was the truth. “Your plan?” He prompted, choking back a curse.

“I’ll not tell you all of it, only your part. When all is set, you will be required to kill Potter. Yes,” she said, almost purring. “I can see that appeals to you. The Dark Lord will raise you high for that, Draco.”

“Pansy, it would never work,” he said, but couldn’t hide his anticipation. Kill Potter? Oh yes, he’d be willing to give much for that opportunity!

“Yes, it will. Once done, we will be leaving this wretched school. Leaving to join our Master and take our rightful place by his side. All you must do is wait for *my* signal. We wouldn’t want you making another mistake, would we?”

Grabbing her hair, he pulled her head close to his and hissed, “Have you forgotten? I have no wand!”

Cat quick, she slid one hand between his thighs and cupped him tightly. “Release me, if you wish to keep these,” she threatened, before squeezing her hand.

She was released immediately, and the look of shock on his face was priceless. "You're learning Draco." Removing her hand, she sat back on her heels and looked at him. "The wand problem has been taken care of. But before I tell you how, I will have a promise from you, a blood oath, mind you. You will not be allowed to slip out of it when you think it convenient!"

"What do you want?" He asked, sullenly.

"Marriage, of course. Smile, Draco, we're about to be engaged. I need the power of the Malfoy name. You need an intelligent wife to keep you from making more mistakes. An excellent match, don't you agree?" There was a dangerous gleam in her eye that any smart man would have noticed.

But then, Draco Malfoy really wasn't that smart. Looking down at her, he thought of his parent's marriage. It was based on much the same sentiment as Pansy suggested for them both. Arranged marriages were common among purebloods. *Besides, she's a whore in the bedroom. At least she'll amuse me!*

"So be it. I agree. Now, about this wand?"

"Not so fast. A blood oath, if you'll remember." Removing a dagger from the pocket of her robe, she unsheathed it, and held out her hand. "Your palm?"

Grimacing, he held out his hand, palm up. Quickly cutting both their palms with the dagger, she clasped his hand and pulled out her wand.

"The words, Draco. Say them now."

"On my oath as a Malfoy, for the honor of my blood, I pledge my life to yours."

Leaning over, she pointed her wand at their joined hands and murmured, "Spiritus Fides!"

They both gasped in pain. As the spell was released, their joined palms burned. As the pain ebbed away, they started to relax, only to cry out as the bond took hold, tightening around them, burning into them like hot embers.

When it was over, they both sat panting, staring at each other in shock. When Draco finally pulled his palm back and looked at it, he saw a black scar where the dagger had cut him.

"You have your oath," he spat. "Now finish this!"

"Now Draco, be nice. I'm about to give you the world." Reaching down, she removed a wand holster from her ankle. Holding it up, she turned it enough so he could see the wand it contained and smiled slyly. "Your wand, I believe?"

"My wand? But Dumbledore..."

"You can be so dim sometimes, Draco. Of course it's not your old wand. It's a replacement. Unregistered, I might add."

“But how?” He asked in bewilderment.

“Does it matter?”

“No. No it doesn’t.” And Draco Malfoy found himself smiling, for the first time in many months.  
*You’re dead, Potter!*

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## Chapter 13 Ferrets and Weasels don’t Mix.

### Spring is the air...

Ron walked into the boy’s dorm. Spotting Harry he walked over and plopped down on his bed. Harry eyed him curiously.

“What’s up mate?”

“It’s ‘Mione. She’s gone off to help Ginny on a potions essay...” Ron’s voice trailed off, mumbling something Harry couldn’t hear.

“What was that Ron? I couldn’t quite make it out.”

“Alright! I miss her! I know she hasn’t gone far, but I miss her anyway!”

“Well Ron, are you all caught up with your homework?”

Ron eyed him suspiciously. “Yeah I am, why?”

“If you’ve picked out the ring you want to make from those drawings I gave you, we can run down to the potions lab and make it. If we’re lucky you can have it done by dinner time.”

Ron’s expression brightened. “Really? Today? Now?”

“We can try. And if we do it, I’ll have Dobby prepare us some picnic baskets and we can skive off dinner. You can give it to her over a nice romantic picnic. I’ll take Ginny to an area we know for our own picnic and stay out of your hair. What do you say?”

“Great! Let’s do it!”

Ron retrieved the ten-galleon piece he had saved for so long and grabbed the drawing of the design he wanted before following Harry down to the potions lab.

“Ok Ron, the first thing we need to do is melt down the Galleon. If we use enough heat, we’ll burn off the impurities, leaving us with mostly pure gold. Once it’s melted, we’ll let it cool down and then shape it into the ring itself. You can’t really mess this up, and even if you do, we can

always re-melt it down and start over. Pull out your galleon and I'll make us a fire. Be sure to put on one of the aprons. The fire is going to be really hot."

After donning a lab apron, Harry pulled out a block of metal from the shelf that was normally used by students to produce metal shavings for some potions. Placing the block on the workbench, he looked at the metal block and cast the spell "*Comburo Fonticulis*". As before, there appeared a blue white tower of flame about six inches high above the block.

"Ron, levitate your galleon into the top of the flame. We want to gently heat the metal so make sure as it floats you rotate it a bit."

Ron deftly levitated the galleon piece into the fire. At first, nothing seemed to happen. But slowly the features softened, melting away. Eventually, the entire coin seemed to be nothing more than a floating blob, occasionally emitting a flash of light.

"Good Ron! Now, keep it there until it stops flashing. That's the impurities burning off."

The two waited long minutes while the melted gold burned off its impurities. The heat from the fountain was intense. When a minute passed with no flashes, Harry had Ron move the melted mass away from the flame.

Harry was about to extinguish the fountain when a voice interrupted them.

"What is going on here?"

Serena Snape stood in the doorway to her office. She had been grading papers when she noticed the heat coming from the potions lab. Stepping into the room, she had found Ron, Harry and a most curious pillar of flame.

Ron spotted Serena and started to stammer. Harry stopped him by touching his arm.

"Just a moment Professor. Let me shut this down and I'll explain everything. Ron, keep that levitating. The workbench isn't too clean and if you set the metal down, we'll have to burn it again to get rid of the new impurities." Waving his wand at the fountain he muttered "*Finite Incantatum*" and the pillar faded away.

Walking over to Serena, he looked embarrassed. "Professor, Ron wants to give his girlfriend a promise ring. I offered to make it for him, but he didn't want that, so I'm helping him make one."

Serena smiled hearing this. *A promise ring for Hermione? She's going to be so happy. And what was that curious pillar spell he used? That could be really handy for potion making!* She thought. *Just to be on the safe side I'd better finish marking those papers out here to keep an eye on them.*

"Ok Harry, you can continue with what you were doing. I'll just mark my papers out here however." She told him.

Harry nodded to her before returning to the workbench. "Ron, the metal should be cooling, but it's still hot and soft. I'll levitate it while you concentrate on the image of a plain ring. See it in

your mind and let your magic build up in you as you picture it. With a sharp stabbing motion of your wand, say, “Transconfigus Promissor Circumvenio”.

Ron’s brow tightened in concentration. Then he muttered the invocation and made a stabbing motion. Suddenly there was a ring; well it was a ring if you were a giant. Ron looked aghast.

Harry chuckled at this expression. “Ron, no worries. Hermione would like a bracelet but let’s do that another time. We’ll just melt it down and do it again.”

Serena watched the two young men, trying hard not to laugh. They were so sincere; it was sweet. She knew Ron wasn’t the best of students and was surprised at how patient Harry was with him. She was startled when Harry invoked his pillar of fire again to melt the oversized ring. *I need to remember that incantation*, she thought. *It’s really useful.*

With the gold melted once more, Harry levitated it back over to the work area and shut the fountain down.

“Ok Ron, let’s try this. Picture the ring. Imagine it in the palm of your hand. Feel its weight and see yourself slipping onto ‘Mione’s finger. See the ring Ron; imagine how happy she’ll be to get the ring. Get all of that in your mind and try the invocation again.”

Ron couldn’t help but smile when he thought of Hermione’s reaction when he gave her the ring. With a dreamy expression, he stabbed at the floating metal and said the incantation. The metal trembled for a moment as the tip of Ron’s wand flared brightly. When the flare subsided, floating above the table was a thick gold ring.

“Very good Ron! We’re almost done. We have the ring, but it’s too thick. It’s more of a man’s ring right now, so we need to do something about that. Keep the images in your mind and when you’re ready, use a slight flick of your wand and say ‘Discedo’”

Ron cast the new spell and the ring sliced deftly into two halves.

“Excellent Ron! Now, we need to resort to some old fashioned hard work. But in an hour or so, you’ll have your ring.”

Harry conjured some abrasive paper and a soft polishing cloth. Handing them both to Ron, he instructed him to work on smoothing down the sharp edges on one of the rings, before polishing it. Harry told him to keep the other unfinished half for the engagement ring.

Harry noticed Serena motioning to him, so he went up to talk to her while Ron polished and smoothed his ring.

“Harry, I must admit I’m impressed,” she said to him in a hushed tone. “Mr. Weasley never struck me as being able to do that kind of fine work before, but you seemed to be able to walk him through it perfectly. I’d bet he’d be capable of making dozens of rings now without your help. I think you’d make a wonderful teacher. Tell me, what are your plans after you graduate?”

Harry hesitated before answering. “I’d... I’d like to come back to Hogwarts and teach, Professor. A lot of people seem to think I’d make a great Auror, but if I survive what’s to come, I think I’d

like to put my days of fighting dark wizards behind me. I know what I'd like to do, and the Headmaster did say he'd like to see me teach here at Hogwarts. I'm pretty good with charms and defense. Professor Dumbledore said he'd take me on in both classes, teaching the younger years."

She frowned at his mention of survival, but decided to let it pass this one time.

"Well Harry, from what I just saw, you have exactly what a person needs to be a teacher. It's a fine occupation for those with the right sort of attitude. I'll let you go back to helping Mr. Weasley, but before you go, tell me, I know he doesn't have a lot of money. Where did he get the gold? I know he wouldn't let you give it for him."

"Oh that? Ron had a ten-galleon piece. We melted it down for its gold." Harry turned and went back to Ron.

*He MELTED down a galleon? I thought you couldn't melt or destroy one of those things! She thought.*

Ron looked to be nearly finished. He had smoothed off all the rough edges and he was busy polishing the ring.

Harry stopped him. "Ron, we still have a couple of things to do. First is to mount a stone in the ring. Since 'Mione was born in September, I'd suggest using her birthstone for this, which is a sapphire. I know you don't have any sapphires on you, but will you accept one from me if I make it for you?"

The red head looked doubtful about this. Harry had helped him make the ring, but it had been mostly his own work, with Harry guiding him. A sapphire would be all Harry's work. But then, if he didn't accept Harry's offer, all he had was a band of gold, which, while nice, wasn't really what he was aiming for. Frowning, he remembered what his mother told him about Harry and his generous nature. It wasn't charity...

*He's really concerned about his financial status and hates taking anything from me, Harry thought. I wish he would get beyond this. I'd like to help him and the rest of my family.*

Harry put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "She's my family too, Ron. I want you both to be happy. I won't put a huge stone in the ring, but I want to do this, for you both. Alright, mate?"

Ron smiled at Harry and nodding. Harry closed his eyes for a moment to picture the type of stone he wanted, modest in size, but perfect. He opened his eyes again and conjured the stone right onto the ring.

The ring now contained a perfect one half-carat Kashmir blue sapphire. Ron nearly choked.

"All right, last step Ron. This is going to be a little embarrassing for you, but I want you to hold the ring in your hand and think carefully. Then I'm going to release a spell at you which will imbue the ring with the essence of Coolar, the promise binding."

Serena looked startled at this. *He's going to imbue the ring with the essence of Coolar? She thought. How is that possible?*

Looking puzzled, Ron asked, “What should I be thinking about?”

Serena smiled at that, and tried not to laugh at the comical expression on Harry’s face.

“On Quidditch, of course,” Harry said, before smacking Ron on the head. “On ‘Mione, you prat! She’s why you’re doing this, isn’t she? Unless you’re thinking of promising yourself to your broom and you haven’t bothered to tell me.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know?”

Rolling his eyes heavenward, Harry continued. “Think about Hermione. Think about how nice her hair smells, about how she feels in your arms. How you feel when you’re kissing her and how important she is to you. Imagine your wedding night and spending the rest of your life with her. Have you got all that? Can you picture it? Feel it?”

Ron’s blush was so hot Harry swore he felt the heat of it. He nodded however, so Harry pointed his wand at Ron and muttered something under his breath. A cool, blue beam of light shot from the tip of the wand and hit Ron on the forehead. For a moment, Ron was enveloped in a blue nimbus, and then it all seemed to flow from him to the ring. The ring glowed brightly before returning back to normal.

“Blimey Harry! What the bloody hell was that!”

Chuckling, Harry conjured a small ring box and handed it to Ron. “I just put a little of what you feel for Hermione into the ring, wrapped around the Coolar bind. When she puts the ring on, it will activate the bind. Now, how about we go talk to Dobby about those picnic baskets?”

Serena Snape watched the two young men walk from the potions lab after they had thanked her for its use. *Harry*. She thought. *That young man is a walking mystery. He breaks natural laws and rules of magic like they are mere obstacles to climb over.* With a shake of her head, she went back to grading her papers.

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### **Ginny and Hermione...**

Ginny and Hermione were working on Ginny’s potions essay. Being her Owl year, the teachers were giving out massive amounts of homework. Ginny had asked Hermione to help her; it was hard having to write a four-foot essay on the properties of an ingredient that had few properties! With Hermione’s help however, they managed to find enough material in the library to take up the necessary length.

Now that the essay was nearly done, with only a paragraph or two to go, she and Hermione started thinking about dinner. They had been in the library most of the afternoon and were starting to get hungry. Hermione was about to suggest they pack up and head back to their house when there was a pop behind them.

Startled, both girls turned around to stare at Dobby!

“OH! Miz Weezy! Miz Granjur! Dobby is so happy to see yous again!”

Ginny smiled. Like Harry, she truly liked this basket case of a house elf. To Hermione, Dobby represented free elves. Dobby was special in her mind.

Hermione smiled at Dobby. "What can we do for you Dobby?"

"Oh my! You is asking to do something for Dobby? You is almost as great as Harry Potter!"

Hermione groaned to herself. If you got Dobby started, he'd spend hours telling people how great "Harry Potter" is.

"No Dobby, I meant why are you here?"

Dobby pulled himself up straight and puffed out his chest to look important. "The great Harry Potter asks that I gives you this message. And I am to waits for your answer."

Curious Hermione took the parchment from Dobby and unrolled it so both she and Ginny could read it.

*Miss Ginevra Molly Weasley & Miss Hermione Jane Granger,*

*Messrs Potter and Weasley do humbly beg you both to join them for a romantic stroll and picnic dinner this evening. Mr. Weasley, in particular, is most anxious that Miss Granger joins him this evening.*

*Dress is casual. You are asked to give your reply to our noblest of messengers, so that the necessary preparations may be completed.*

*With all of our love,  
Messrs Potter and Weasley.*

They both giggled at the idea of Dobby being noble, but after a moment's shared look they turned to Dobby to tell them they would be delighted to attend.

Dobby was, of course, very pleased to return to Harry Potter with the message. But to be honest, he would have been happy if he had been carrying a full chamber pot, as long as he got to visit Harry.

At the appropriate time, the girls met up with Harry and Ron. Both were carrying large picnic baskets. Harry kissed Ginny and took a hold of her hand, but Ron seemed shy.

Laughing, Harry slapped Ron on the back. "Come on you guys, let's go have a picnic."

Harry led them down to the spot Ginny had shown him months ago. Then he pointed to Ron and told him of a spot about 50 meters away that they could use. Ginny and Hermione looked surprised. They had expected to dine together. What was going on?

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## Hermione and Ron...

Ron found the spot that Harry had told him about. He could see Harry and Ginny off in the distance, setting up their picnic. Removing a blanket from the basket, he spread it out and helped Hermione to sit. When he joined her, she pulled the basket over and removed the food.

The couple ate a pleasant meal, occasionally offering each other a bite of something. Dobby had done a good job putting the basket together, filling it with some of their favorite foods.

Hermione enjoyed the picnic, but could feel the tension in Ron. It was something she hadn't felt in him since before the holidays. She tried to broach the subject a few times, but he kept changing the topic. *BOYS!* She thought. *I'm going to have to drag it out of him I see.*

"Ron, I can tell something is bothering you," she finally said in exasperation. "What is it?"

Ron winced slightly, and then shook his head sadly. "I never could hide anything from you 'Mione."

*OH MY GOD! Is he going to dump me?* She thought frantically. Her mind raced and emotions flared within her; anger, hurt, and rage. So intent was she on her own thoughts, his words barely registered on her. *Wait a second! Did he say something about my parents? Permission? EARTH TO HERMIONE! PAY ATTENTION!*

Ron sat there looking hopeful at her. AND SHE MISSED HEARING WHAT EVER HE WANTED HER TO HEAR! She wanted to scream. Instead, she did the only thing she could think of. She asked in a small voice. "You're not dumping me?"

Ron blinked in surprise. "Hermione, I could never dump you. Weren't you listening to me? I love you and want to ask your parents for permission to marry you. That is, if you'll have me."

Now it was Ron's turn to seem doubtful and embarrassed. Especially since Hermione looked on the verge of tears. Her eyes misted up and her lower lip trembling. Ron immediately started to backpedal.

"I wouldn't blame you if you turned me down 'Mione. I'm not as smart as you. I'm clumsy and I rarely say the right thing. Bloody Hell, if it hadn't been for Harry pounding on me..."

Hermione stopped him by the simple, but extremely effective method of wrapping her arms around him, pushing him down to the ground and kissing him.

They kissed for a long while before something started to bother Ron. He lay on something sharp and it was digging into his hip. The Ring! He gently disengaged from her and pulled the box from his pocket. If he looked embarrassed before, now he was taking it to new heights.

"Hermione, you know I don't have a lot of money. I wanted to give you a ring like the one Harry gave Ginny. I thought it would take me a long time to save up for something like that, but Harry offered to help me make one instead. He coached me through making it. And he did insist on making the stone for it. He also imbued the ring with an enchantment. This is a promise ring, and I hope to be able to buy you an engagement for your birthday."

She placed her hand over his mouth. "Ron, I love you and I do want to marry you. How much money you have is not important to me. Can I see the ring please?"

With trembling hands he opened the box and pulled out the ring.

Hermione gasped. The ring was perfect! The fact that Ron had made it made it all the more special to her. She extended her hand and smiled tremulously.

He placed the ring on her finger, and, on impulse, kissed her hand. When his lips touched her hand, the ring glowed a bright blue, spreading to cover them both, before fading away. Hermione looked down at her new ring and noted the stone softly pulsating, in time to Ron's heartbeat.

She wrapped her arms around Ron and kissed him passionately. Ron returned the kiss holding her tight. She ran her hand up under the back of his shirt. This was something she couldn't learn from a book. Her mind lost connection as it was overwhelmed by sensation. The two kissed and tasted each other. Ron slid his hand up under her shirt and gently cupped her breast; she pulled him to her tightly kissing his face, his ears, and his neck, everywhere!

After an eternity of kissing and touching, they couple allowed their passions to simmer. They weren't prepared to go any further than they had. But they had crossed a major line tonight, entering a world of intimacy they had never explored. By mutual consent, they fixed their clothing and sat there quietly, sipping butterbeer and talking about their future together.

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### **Harry and Ginny...**

Harry watched Ron and Hermione walk further along the lakeshore before turning to help Ginny unpack. They sat in a comfortable silence for a while, enjoying their dinner before Harry spoke up.

"I hope Ron doesn't blow it, or I'm going to be really hacked at him."

"What do you mean?"

"I helped him make his promise ring for 'Mione today, Gin. It's important to me that she's happy and I'll be really annoyed if Ron blows this."

Ginny chuckled at that. The two were silent for a while longer before Ginny spoke again.

"Harry, can we talk honestly about something?"

"We can talk about anything. I have no secrets from you."

She placed a hand on his arm. "Well, this might be a bit embarrassing for you."

"Why don't you just ask me what you want to ask, Gin? I'll let you know if I'm too embarrassed to talk about it."

"All right. How much do you know... really know...about sex?"

Harry blinked. This was not what he thought she was going to talk about! He blushed and mumbled something unintelligible.

Ginny moved to kneel in front of him, taking his face in her hands. "Love, I'm not trying to embarrass you. It took me a while to understand that no one has given you the talk like my mum did to me, or my dad did with Ron. So I'm guessing that you probably don't know much, right?"

He sighed in resignation and embarrassment. "No Gin. I know a little, mostly what I learned in Muggle School and what I've picked up from listening to the guys. And the stuff you showed me. Have I been doing something wrong?"

She crushed him to her, his head lying against her soft breasts. "Merlin no, Harry! But I want to show you something that will help. Lavender gave me a copy of a book she had. There's information here that'll make things even better for us, more enjoyable. You've been wonderful Harry, but there are more things we can do for each other. And when the time's finally is right, I want our first lovemaking to be perfect for both of us."

She moved to sit next to him. He automatically put his arm around her shoulders and leaned in to kiss her head before she could continue.

She pulled a small book out of her pocket. He glanced down at it. The title read "Driving your Wizard crazy!" Glancing at her, he wondered how that kind of book could be of use to him. She giggled at his expression. "It's enchanted silly. Here, you hold it and read the title again."

He took the book from her and the title changed. "Driving your Witch Crazy!" He rolled his eyes, grinned at her and said, "Good old Lavender."

"Harry, I've read it. Several times, actually. But I've been reluctant to try anything new because I wasn't sure how you'd take it."

"Gin, I'd do anything to make you happy. If that means reading the book, I'll start it tonight. Who knows, I might even surprise you! I know I don't know much about sex, but I was always hoping we'd help each other learn."

"Well, study your lessons hard Mr. Potter, because I expect to test you often on your practical applications of the theory," she said, while gently rubbing him erect.

He growled in her ear and lay back, pulling her over on top of him. They lay like that, kissing and grinding against each other, until a noise interrupted them.

"OY! POTTER! Where are you?" Ron shouted.

Quickly, they rolled apart and he pocketed the book. It had gotten late and the sun was already down. Ron and Hermione were approaching their spot.

Spotting the two, Hermione rushed over to Ginny. Ginny threw her arms around the other girl. "Harry told me what was going on! I'm so happy for you!"

Hermione turned to Harry and grabbed him. She whispered in his ear, "Thank you my brother! You were right!" He smiled back at that.

Harry and Ginny packed up their basket and the two couples headed back to the castle. Halfway there, Ron asked Harry if he wanted to lose another game of Wizard's Chess.

He laughed, saying, "Sorry mate, I've got a new book I want to start reading tonight."

Hermione turned to stare at him. "Harry you better not be planning on going off and producing another new theory like the last time!"

"No 'Mione, it's a book Ginny gave me. She got it from Lavender. It looks really interesting. Tell you what. Once I'm done with it, I'll loan it to Ron. When he's done, he can give it to you," he said with a laugh. Ginny started snickering.

Hermione flushed beet red. She knew exactly what book he was talking about. There were several copies of it floating around the girl's dorm and, while she hadn't read it yet, she knew exactly what it was about.

"Hey now! What do I need with another book? Isn't reading for school enough work?" Ron asked, plaintively.

"Trust me Ron; this is one book you'll want to read. And Hermione will be so proud of you for reading a book that you didn't have to read for some assignment!"

Ron looked intrigued by that idea, while Hermione couldn't decide whether to sputter in indignation or grin.

The two couples walked back into the school, chatting happily, as the sky darkened and night fell behind them.

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### **The Snape's Private Apartment, that evening...**

Severus Snape walked tiredly into the apartment. It was late and he had just finished up grading the fifth year DADA homework in his office. Walking down the entry hall, he entered the living room and paused, hearing his wife muttering to herself.

*I wonder what has her so worked up this time? He thought. What ever happened to spending a normal night together? Reading by the fire, talking over the day...*

She was pacing in the living room and muttering under her breath. Surprisingly, she had her wand out. Severus watched for a few minutes, noting the pile of metal bricks that littered the floor and one lone brick sitting on the coffee table.

Turning suddenly, she whipped her wand around and, pointed at the small block of metal on the coffee table, cried "*Comburo Fonticulis!*"

Nothing happened.

Severus' eyes widened and he choked back a laugh.

Serena whirled around to him, her wand poised. Spotting him, she glared for a moment then whirled again to face that damnable brick of metal, shouting, "*COMBURO FONTICULUS!*"

The brick ignored her.

*I have to learn that spell! It's too useful! There must be something wrong, maybe a wand movement, or perhaps I'm not giving the proper inflection, or maybe...* Finally noticing Severus' laughter, she turned to march towards him.

For his part, Severus was too busy trying to keep his feet under him to notice the dangerous expression on her face. Giving up, he dropped to his knees, holding his sides and laughed harder.

"Laugh if you will, but I'm going to master that spell! Merlin, Severus, he used it to melt a galleon today! Do you have any idea how useful that could be in potion making?"

She pulled herself up to her not so impressive height and glared at him as he tried to control himself.

*He's no help! Bloody Man!* She thought. Turning again, this time she pointed her wand at the metal brick and shouted, "*COMBURO FONTICULUS!*" She even added a foot stomp to her actions to let the brick know she was serious. The brick, being nothing more than a brick, expressed its opinion of her spell by doing nothing.

Severus collapsed on the floor, howling with laughter. Had any one of his students witnessed this sight, they probably would have ended up in the St. Mungos Psyche ward from shock.

Serena whirled on Severus. "Do you have a death wish?" she hissed. When he continued to laugh, she did her best to muster what was left of her dignity and started to walk out of the apartment.

Severus snagged her by the ankle.

"W-w-where do you think you're g-g-going at this hour Serena?" Severus asked, still trying to control his laughing.

"Why, to see Harry, of course. I want him to show me that spell! I've been trying for hours to make it work!"

"Serena, I know you're a Potions Mistress, maybe even better than I am, but you'll never learn that spell."

She pulled her ankle from his grasp and seriously thought about kicking him. "Don't you think I'm good enough?"

*It's time to try a different tactic,* he thought. "Serena, love, how much of your Latin do you remember? I know the school you attended is one of the best in the Caribbean..."

Serena blinked. "Latin? Severus I don't see how this is relevant. I'm just doing something wrong with that spell. Harry can..."

"No love, he can't show you. *Comburo Fonticulis* is Latin for 'Burning Fountain'. It's the spell Hermione Granger made up to see if Harry really could perform any kind of magic, as long as he didn't know it was impossible. It's a made up spell. He's the only one that can make it work."

Serena looked at her husband sheepishly for a long moment. "Well damn..." she finally murmured.

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### **Somewhere in England, location unknown, first week in April...**

Voldemort sat in his chamber, brooding. He had thought that killing the student at Hogwarts would have resulted in the removal of Dumbledore as Headmaster, but it hadn't.

He had vented his rage and anger on his servants for a while, but that didn't dispel his anger. He even spent time sending pain to Potter through the scar.

POTTER! According to Wormtail, Potter had somehow found a way to block his attacks entirely.

*Damn that boy! How dare he defy me? Voldemort raged. How can he block the pain? Damn him! I will teach him to fear me yet.*

"Send in Wormtail!" The Dark Lord growled.

A short, fat, balding man scurried into the chamber and groveled at his feet. "How may I serve you, my lord?"

"Wormtail... Send word to my servants at Hogwarts. They may proceed with the plan and tell them I will be most displeased with them if Potter survives. Oh, and Wormtail, if this fails, I will be most unhappy with you. I daresay you are not as strong as Lucius is. You would probably not survive what he went through for his failure!"

Wormtail scurried from the room to send his message.

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### **Pansy Parkinson...**

Pansy was elated. She had received the coded message, via owl, with this morning's mail. Finally, she was going to leave this place and join her master. And if Draco lives up to his part, they would be rewarded greatly. She promised herself that tonight, after they had gotten away, she'd show Draco that being married to her had certain advantages. *Besides, sex is a good way to control a man*, she thought.

Pansy sat in her seat at the Slytherin table, with Draco next to her. She looked over to her fellow Death Eaters, and nodded. Each selected a seventh year student on whom they would cast the

Imperio curse. Out of the three major Unforgiveables, Imperio was the stealthiest. It made no noise, no light and, once it was cast, the controller didn't even need the wand to control their subject.

She waited calmly. She needed to make sure her fellow Death Eaters had their subjects under control. When she received their signals, she knew they'd wait for her signal to start.

After sending the 'wait to begin' signal, she leaned over and whispered to Draco, "Darling, the time is come for you to prove your love for me and our master. Wait until you have a clear shot."

Draco nodded, a predatory gleam in his eye.

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### **Hogwarts, evening meal, the Great Hall, mid April...**

The past few weeks had seemed to fly by. DA Meetings, more training with Dumbledore, even a few snatched hours of time off with Ginny. He had read that book of hers several times. He hadn't been able to find a place or a time to put any of the techniques to use, however.

He'd spent a lot of his time exploring the aspects of his latest idea and had made a few more of the crystal structures needed for it. These structures were too complex for a simple Replico charm to duplicate them. Hermione and Professor Flitwick were researching alternative ways of duplication, but there hadn't been much progress on that front.

Harry was sitting at the Gryffindor table with Ginny beside him, watching Hermione and Ron with a smile. Hermione leaned against Ron and he had one arm around her. Every so often he would whisper something into her ear, causing her to smile. She was a changed person since receiving the ring from Ron. She walked around in a constant state of happiness.

When Hermione finally noticed his smile, she looked at him curiously. "What, Harry?" She asked.

"I just think its funny 'Mione. You've spent the last six years learning everything you could about the Wizarding world, but now, for the first time, you act like you truly fit in. In a way, I envy you that."

Ginny shot him an angry glare. Seeing it, he said, "No Gin, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I don't belong here. Just think about it. You and Ron grew up in the Wizarding world. Hermione and I didn't. Neither of us even knew about it until we got our Hogwarts letters. Hermione has spent the last six years studying the Wizarding world, she probably knows more about it than either of you, but she never felt like she fitted in. That's why she kept studying. She kept looking for her place, and she finally found it...with Ron."

Ginny frowned. Hermione broke in, "But Harry, you have Ginny."

Harry nodded vigorously, "Oh I know I do 'Mione and I'm damn lucky. I've found love and a family, but I'm still a clumsy stranger in the Wizarding world. I don't really understand it. Did you know that Ginny's dad had to explain to me the lighting ceremony and the incantation, for Remus' wedding? I didn't have a clue what I was supposed do, or how to do it, until Arthur explained it to me."

Turning to Ginny he smiled before continuing, "I hope you don't mind love, but I'm afraid I'm going to be a socially inept moron for a long time to come."

She patted him on the cheek. "That's all right Harry. I don't mind you being a moron as long as you understand you're *my* moron."

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### **Pansy...**

Pansy looked over at her compatriots, each signaled their readiness. She nodded and gave them the signal to begin.

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### **Harry Potter...**

Harry stared at Ginny for a moment then started to chuckle. "I suppose I walked right into that." He leaned in to kiss her when he was interrupted by a scream in the hall.

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### **Severus Snape...**

Severus was sitting quietly with Serena, talking and enjoying her company. He would never admit it to her, but her presence had a great calming effect on him. He had lived and enjoyed life more since she came into his life, than all the years previous.

A movement caught his eye. *What the hell is this?* He thought to himself.

Three students had risen to their feet and were holding wands out, aimed at the head table! He sat there in shock for a moment. Spells were cast and someone screamed, breaking him from his paralysis. He could see two spells racing directly for him and Serena.

With a lunge, he pushed Serena out of her chair. He gasped as he felt a burning sensation, like someone had poured hot wax on him. He continued to push Serena to the floor, pinning her there. He felt something, a liquid, hot and sticky, running from his right shoulder down to the center of his chest. He tried to roll to reach his wand, but the pain caused him to gasp. The world reeled and darkness claimed him.

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### **Serena Snape...**

Serena was enjoying her meal. She knew Severus was watching her and was pleased by that fact. Every woman wants to know her husband desires her, but Severus had needs other than just mere sex. She'd known from the moment she had met him that he was, in some ways, nearly as emotionally damaged as Harry Potter. And it pleased her no end that she was the one he turned to, to help him break out of that shell he had built around himself.

She frowned. Something had drawn Severus' attention away from her. She looked up and didn't quite comprehend what she saw. Three students were standing up, pointing their wands. Someone screamed.



Suddenly, Severus lunged at her, knocking her off her seat. He made a noise, moved a little and then collapsed, letting his full weight rest on her.

When he went limp, she put her hand to his shoulder, thinking to push him off and ask what the hell he thought he was doing. Jerking her hand back, she looked at it and blanched at the blood.

When she gently rolled him off her, she could see that his face was ashen and his robe was ripped and soaked with blood. Peeling the robe back, she saw that he's been slashed from shoulder to the center of his chest.

"Severus? SEVERUS!" She screamed.

Gaining no response, she grabbed her wand. The damage was bad. Not immediately fatal, but it needed healing now or he'd bleed to death.

*A cutting curse...someone tried to kill him with a cutting curse...to kill US with a cutting curse! Fucking Malfoy! You'll pay this time, you little bastard! I'll gut you myself!*

Shaking her head to dispel her thoughts, she set to work, healing her husband as best she could.

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### **Albus Dumbledore...**

Albus Dumbledore was sitting at the head table, talking to Hagrid. The half-giant had recently returned from a trip to negotiate with a tribe of Swedish Giants. It was hoped that they could get some of the giants on their side. The mission hadn't been a total failure, but by the same token, he hadn't convinced them to join their cause.

Hagrid hated disappointing Dumbledore. The large man considered Dumbledore to be one of the greatest wizards and he felt he owed his life to him. It was Dumbledore who had stood up for Hagrid when he had been expelled from Hogwarts in his youth.

Albus was trying to convince Hagrid to make another attempt with the Swedish Giants, when he was pushed out of his chair, hard. So hard, that he collided with Professor McGonagall and they both fell to the floor. Dumbledore was about to admonish Hagrid when he saw a Reducto spell hit the man on the shoulder. Hagrid roared in pain and then tipped over the teacher's table, effectively blocking any additional spells, as the heavy stone made for an excellent barrier. All of the remaining teachers dived behind it.

Dumbledore frowned as he heard Serena's scream. He motioned to Madam Pomfrey to go assist her.

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### **Pansy...**

*Damn that half-breed!* She thought. With the table in the way, the teachers were effectively protected, although she was convinced that her subject might have tagged Snape with a cutting hex. *All right, time to go to plan B.*

She made her Imperio victim start shooting into the crowd, knowing that the panic it caused would facilitate their escape. The other two Death Eaters followed her lead, making their victims fire indiscriminately at the mass of students in the hall.

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### **Harry...**

“SEVERUS!”

He heard that cry and, while it tore at him, it also filled him with a grim determination. His magic, always available now, swelled to new heights and threatened to overwhelm him.

His eyes blazing, he climbed onto the Gryffindor table. Scanning the crowd, he searched for the three known Death Eaters...

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### **The Great Hall, Chaos...**

With the head table tipped over, blocking the teachers from sight, the three students fired off their spells at the seething mass of students, picking targets at random. The Hall erupted in a panic.

Neville and two other DA members approached a student who was busy firing haphazardly at the crowd. Neville grabbed the student by the shoulder and spun him around. At the same time, another DA member aimed a well-placed kick to the boy's knee, snapping it and dropping him like a stone. Neville grabbed his wand and bound the student with an Incarcerous spell.

Looking around, Neville noted other DA Members had disarmed each of the students in a similar fashion. A first year was dropped to the ground with a cutting hex to her leg. Another fell to a Reducto that hit a nearby wall, causing debris to hit him in the head. There were more injured all over the Great Hall.

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### **Pansy...**

Pansy was pissed. How had their subjects been disarmed so quickly? She saw Potter climb to the top of the table. *He'll ruin our entire plan!* She thought. She quickly Imperio'd another student to continue what the first three had started.

---

### **Harry...**

He was surprised when three more students started shooting into the crowd. The teachers were finally poking their heads over the table to see what was going on. Harry pulled one of his new crystals from his pocket. He knew he had to spot the Death Eaters fast and put them down. Holding the crystal he released a very small amount of power into it, while murmuring, “Incendio!”

Flame erupted. THERE! The right arm of three students' robes burst into flame.

### **Pansy...**

Pansy screamed as her mark burned and the sleeve of her robe burst into flame. She quickly extinguished the flame and looked about wildly. She felt eyes on her. His eyes. They were like twin search lights, boring into her, testing the measure of her soul and finding her wanting.

In a panic, she raised her wand and fired off a cutting hex. He didn't even bother trying to evade it. The hex only nicked his arm. He looked at her, a sad smile on his face, as if he was trying to tell her something.

She raised her wand to cast again when his hand shot out with blinding speed. A ball of white light hurtled toward her at incredible speed. She tried to cast a shield, but the spell blew right through it, never even slowing.

It hit Pansy square in the chest. She was thrown into the wall with such force that the castle's stone actually cracked and indented.

Her neck broken, her skull crushed, most of her bones shattered, what remained of Pansy Parkinson slid to the floor with a wet, sucking sound.

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### **Luna Lovegood...**

Unlike Pansy, Marietta was rather inept at magic. She was having trouble dousing the flames that had erupted from her right arm. When Luna spotted her, she didn't stop to consider anything. Lifting her hand, she cast a Reducto at the Death Eater.

Her head exploded in a fountain of gore as the spell blasted through her skull. Blood, bone and flesh sprayed the floor as she fell. Blood pooled around the body as the heart, not understanding its own imminent death, continued to pump.

Screaming students ran, slipping and sliding through the mess, trying to get away from the twitching, bloody mass that had once been Marietta Edgecombe.

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### **Hermione Granger...**

Hermione spotted Michael Corner. In all the confusion, Michael had shed his burning robe and was trying to sneak out the door. Hermione whipped out her wand and hit him, freezing him in place with a Petrificus Totalus, and then she placed him in an Incarcerous bind.

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### **Draco Malfoy...**

Draco stared down at the body of Pansy Parkinson. He was loathed to admit that he had developed some feelings for her, no matter how twisted they were. His eyes narrowed as he looked back at the Gryffindor table and saw Harry Potter standing on it. He had a clear shot. It was now or never. The teachers were starting to stir from behind their table.

He stood and whipped up the wand from his ankle holster. Pointing it he yelled, “AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Student’s scrambled for cover. Harry dodged the curse by diving across the table.

As Harry dove away, Draco saw a redhead stand. When her hand came up with no wand, he smirked and took aim.

“DIFFINDO!” Ginny shouted.

When the spell hit him, Draco’s neck snapped forward as his body was thrown back into the Slytherin table. Sliding to the floor, gasping for air, he raised his hands to his chest and touched his wet, sucking lungs. In shock, he moved one hand down to his stomach and fondled the entrails spilling over his lap and onto the floor.

As the blood pumped from his chest, darkness engulfed him. The Severing Charm had done its job. Draco Malfoy was dead.

---

### **Harry...**

Climbing back to his feet on the table, Harry looked around at the chaos before him. Students were crying, screaming and trampling the injured. The teachers seemed to be in a state of shock. There would be no help from there.

“SILENCE!” He roared.

Heads swung around to look at him. After his dive across a table full of food, his robes were a mess. He even had mashed potatoes in his hair.

“Neville, see to the wounded. Ron I want security out. Blaise, lock ’em down!” Harry snapped.

“MOVE!” Harry growled into the silence when no one moved.

Suddenly there was a great burst of activity as DA members moved among the students. Injured were made comfortable, some were healed. Ron posted four students at the entrance to the Great Hall. Blaise and his squad moved quietly through their list of Slytherins and other students, disarming people who were on their questionable list.

Harry climbed down off the table and looked at Ginny gratefully. “Thank you love,” he said quietly.

When he went to hug her, she held up her hand casting a cleaning charm on him first. Shaking her head, she hugged him.

“Ron,” Harry said, turning towards the redhead, his arm still around Ginny. “Gather up the prefects and set them to moving the uninjured back to their houses. Oh, and find the wands from our Death Eaters and Draco. I’m sure they’ll be needed.”

Dropping his arm from around Ginny, he walked over to Hermione, who stood watching Michael Corner. Reviving the Death Eater, Harry knelt down next to him.

“You’ve been caught,” Harry said, conversationally. “Soon, you’ll be turned over to Aurors. You might receive some leniency, if you cooperate. If not, then you’ll probably be sent through the veil sometime tomorrow. I suggest you think about that, Michael. Think hard. You picked the wrong side.”

Michael’s face paled.

Harry levitated Corner and walked him up to the head table, which Hagrid had finally righted. Hermione and Ginny followed him. He unceremoniously dropped the bound Death Eater in front of the Headmaster.

Dumbledore sat his face ashen. Harry almost felt sorry for him, until he remembered the cries of the injured students. He gave the old man a hard look, but the Headmaster’s eyes were on his students, the injured, and the dead.

“One Death Eater, Headmaster. I’m sure he will have a fascinating story to tell us. And if you feel guilty about the injured, you should. This mess is of your making, Sir,” he said in a low, hard tone.

Without a second look he walked down the table to where Serena and Madam Pomfrey were working on Severus. He was conscious and spending most of his time glaring at Poppy. Harry went to Serena and touched her on the shoulder, the concern apparent in his eyes. She smiled weakly at him.

“He’ll be alright, Harry,” she said, reassuringly.

“Good, I was worried...” he said softly and gave her a shy smile.

Madam Pomfrey turned away from Severus and, noting the blood dripping down Harry’s arm, said, “Mr. Potter, you’re injured.”

He shrugged. “It’s nothing Madam Pomfrey. There are people who are hurt far more than I am. They’re being moved to the infirmary as we speak. If Professor Snape is capable of being moved, my friends and I will be happy to move him up there as well.”

Madam Pomfrey looked startled. She glanced up to see people being levitated onto stretchers and moved out of the Great Hall. She had been so busy working on Severus, that she never noticed the extent of the injuries among the students. She told Harry to help Severus to the infirmary before hustling out of the Great Hall, following the floating stretchers.

Harry was about to help Snape when Blaise trotted up to him. With a wicked smile, he told Harry they had collected twenty-two wands. Harry nodded.

“Give them the option we talked about Blaise, the blood oath, or their wands will be turned over to the Aurors when they arrive.” He said softly.

When Blaise nodded and turned to leave, Serena and Severus looked between the students. Serena finally asked weakly, "Blood oath, Harry?"

"Yes Professor. We had twenty-two students of questionable loyalty who Pansy had been working on converting. We've confiscated their wands. If they want them back, they'll have to take a blood oath, stating they will never support Voldemort."

Serena was about to protest, but stopped when Severus weakly touched her hand. "Serena, he's right. Today the war came to Hogwarts. Harry is forcing people to pick which side they want to be on. And rightly so."

Harry was about to give Severus a hand when Ginny stopped him. "Harry, how much longer are you intending to bleed all over the place? I swear you'd let yourself bleed to death while you're busy helping friends! And in case you haven't noticed, you're still glowing."

Harry looked startled. Ginny pulled his robe off so she could get at his arm. She deftly healed it, and then gave him a stern look, saying, "I'm getting tired of having to heal you, Mr. Potter! If you expect me to have to heal you every day after we're married, forget about it."

Hermione coughed to cover a snicker.

He smiled gently down at her. "I'll remember that love, although I sincerely hope the only injuries I see after we're married come from me teaching our kids to play Quidditch."

Ginny grinned, pleased by that remark.

He turned back to Professor Snape. "Sir do you think you can walk to the infirmary, or would you like a stretcher?"

Severus frowned and started to say something but Serena overrode him. "I think he can walk. But we'll all go with him, to make sure he goes there, instead of heading down the apartment...stubborn man!"

As the five of them slowly left the Great Hall, they never noticed that Dumbledore still sat at the head table, still in a state of shock.

Half way to the infirmary Ginny sidled up to Harry. "You're still glowing," she murmured.

He paused and closed his eyes. His brow furrowed in concentration and he started to sweat. When he opened his eyes, he started to shimmer. For a brief moment, it looked like there were two Harry's. Then the two images merged together and the glow vanished.

Severus raised an eyebrow at Harry. "A glamour Harry? Why?"

Harry gave him a worried look. "I don't seem to be able to lower the magic level Sir. I don't know why. The glamour will have to do until I can figure out how to fix this."

Serena and Severus both started to speak at the same time. Severus looked at his wife and shrugged then motioned for her to go ahead. “Don’t worry about it Harry, it’s not going to harm you and we’ll see if we can come up with a solution for it.”

Severus nodded an agreement. Together they continued their slow walk to the infirmary.

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### **Dumbledore, back in the Great Hall...**

Minerva McGonagall looked stricken. The war had come to Hogwarts in a big way. Students were dead, others were injured, and Albus Dumbledore seemed to be in a state of shock. She reached out and touched his arm. “Albus you cannot sit here all night. There are things we must do.”

Dumbledore seemed to shake out of his shock. “Right you are, as usual Minerva,” he said, before turning to Hagrid.

“Hagrid, go up to the owlery and lock it up. Make sure no students send any owls, at least for tonight...maybe tomorrow as well. Minerva, let’s go to my office. There is much to discuss.”

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### **Hogwarts Infirmary...**

Harry, Ginny and Hermione sat with Professor Snape and his wife. The group of them talked casually for about an hour. Serena made a few quiet comments about how impressed she was, both with the DA and Harry, tonight. Harry was about to reply when Professor McGonagall entered the infirmary and walked over to them.

The number of injuries upset McGonagall. The infirmary was more than half full. She stepped over to Professor Snape and the others, “The headmaster has requested that all of you meet in his office. Severus, are you capable of walking that far?”

“I’m fine, Minerva. I was just waiting for Poppy to release me. However, I suspect this is more important. We’ll escort these students to the Headmaster’s office.”

“Very good. I still have a few more people to find anyway,” she said, before walking out of the infirmary.

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### **Headmaster’s office, Hogwarts...**

When Harry and his friends arrived in the Headmaster’s office, the office quickly started to fill up. Most of the professors were there, as were Remus, Tonks and Alistair Moody. After a few minutes, Professor McGonagall strode into the office with Ron following her.

In one corner of the office, Michael Corner stood, still tied up in ropes, his eyes darting fearfully from person to person.

Dumbledore laid out a series of wands across his desk. “This one”, he said holding up a wand, “is unregistered. It was found in Mr. Malfoy’s hand. It also has cast two killing curses, and is responsible for the death of Nigel Goldsmith...”

Harry’s frown deepened when he heard this news. He turned his attention back to Dumbledore.

“...The rest of these wands, taken from the known Death Eaters in the student population, reveal a number of Imperius curses being cast. I think it’s safe to say that the students involved in most of today’s fight were under the Imperius curse, cast by the three Death Eaters.

“In a moment, we will question Mr. Corner under Veritaserum. I’m sure we will find out many answers to our questions. Alistair, would you please do the honors?”

Moody pulled Michael Corner into the center of the room and, pulling out a bottle of Veritaserum, handed the bottle to Tonks. Grabbing the young man by the hair, he yanked back hard. Corner opened his mouth to yelp and Tonks stepped up to administer the dosage. Corner stood swaying for a moment. Moody conjured a simple stool and pushed Corner down on it.

When Corner’s eyes glazed over, Dumbledore began speaking.

“Michael Corner, can you hear me?”

“Yes”

“Tell me about the night of the Valentine’s Ball. Who killed Nigel Goldsmith?”

“Pansy cast an Imperio on Dennis Creevey. She gave him the wand and made him kill Nigel. After he killed Nigel, she got the wand back and obliviated his memory.”

“And what was your plan for tonight at dinner?”

“My master was upset. Several attempts to hurt Snape had failed. He wanted the Snapes and you killed. Pansy also tasked Malfoy to kill Potter, as a means of atoning for previous failures. After your deaths, we were to injure and kill as many students as possible, before the four of us made our escape in the ensuing panic.

“My master has learned he can no longer hurt Potter through his scar, so he wanted him out of the way. My Master now perceives Potter to be as big a threat to him as you, Headmaster.”

“Where is your master now?”

“I do not know. I have never been to his lair, and I understand it’s under a Fidelis charm.”

“When did you accept your Dark Mark?”

“I was inducted during the summer. Pansy Parkinson recruited me.”

“Did Pansy try recruiting anyone else in Hogwarts?”



“She was always trying to recruit people. A few were interested, but most seemed to be afraid of getting involved. A few told Pansy that Potter would kill my lord and then come for them.”

Harry muttered, “Damn straight on that.”

Michael turned to look at Harry. “He fears you now. He is no longer sure he can kill you. He knows there is something about you he doesn’t understand.”

Dumbledore looked around the room. “Does anyone have any additional questions?”

No one spoke. “Alistair, put him to sleep. We will deal with him later.”

When Dumbledore spoke again, he addressed the room. “Very well. In a little while I shall alert the Aurors. It is important that they do not know that we were aware of the Death Eaters in our midst. As far as everyone is concerned, we knew nothing.”

Harry broke in harshly, “So in other word, you want us to lie to the Aurors to cover up this fiasco.”

“Harry I hardly think...”

“With all due respect Headmaster, we have two dead Death Eaters, one dead son of a Death Eater, nine injured students, one captured Death Eater, and a first year student who is dead, because you opted to allow those Death Eaters to remain in the school. Tell me Sir, what part of that would you not consider to be a fiasco?” Harry asked in a steely tone.

“Oh, we’ll participate in this cover up Sir, but this is your fault,” Harry continued in the shocked silence. “You are the reason why Nigel will never go home, grow up and have a life. You are the reason nine students will probably suffer through months of nightmares, as will many of the unwounded. I *killed* tonight because of your actions. So did Ginny and Luna. And frankly, it’s made me feel used and unclean. This was unnecessary and a complete waste.”

“I am sorry you feel that way Harry, but I had hoped to speak to you about the actions taken by the students. Students who were following your orders, I might add.”

“Sir, what you saw tonight is not a topic for discussion. What my friends and I do during our off hours is our business, so long as we break no school rules. I know of no rules we have broken.”

“Harry, I am the Headmaster of this school as well as the leader of the Order of the Phoenix. I am asking you for an explanation.”

“As Headmaster, I owe you the respect of a student. As for the Order, I owe it, and you as its leader, nothing. I am not part of that organization, nor at this point do I wish to be. I find myself in the sad position of re-evaluating your motives. I will remind you that I once offered to ally myself with you and the Order, not place myself under its command. The simple fact is your inactions have given me grave doubts about your commitment to fight this war. I will not endanger anyone else by revealing information to someone I have very little confidence in.

“I’m sorry this had to happen Sir, but...Moody! If you reach for your wand it will be the last thing you ever do!” Harry barked.

Moody, standing behind Harry, froze, his hand hovering over his pocket. When Dumbledore motioned for Moody to relax, Harry stood.

Glancing at the Snapes, then Remus and Tonks, he said, “Headmaster, it’s late and tempers are frayed. I’m going to bed before I say something you may regret.”

When Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione left the office, Dumbledore slumped back in his chair like he’d been slapped.

Severus Snape arched an eyebrow at Dumbledore before speaking. “Was there anything else you wished to speak about, Sir?”

Dumbledore shook his head negatively. Serena, Severus, Remus and Tonks filed from the room.

The adults were surprised to find Harry and his friends waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs.

Severus glanced at the four students. “We need to talk.”

Back in Dumbledore’s office McGonagall and Moody looked at the weary Dumbledore.

“Why did you let him say that to you Albus?” asked an irate Moody.

“Because in many ways Alistair, Harry was right. I allowed those students to remain in school when I could have removed them anytime. My decision did result in the death of an innocent muggle born student, as well as Draco’s and the two others. Alas, I fear that, more importantly, this has resulted in a breach between Harry and I that may be beyond repair.”

Minerva cut in. “Albus, what do you think Mr. Potter is doing with those students?”

“I do not know Minerva. What I saw tonight left me quite puzzled. Unfortunately, we have no time to dwell on these mysteries. Alistair, contact the Aurors. It’s time for them to get involved.”

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### **Snapes Apartment...**

Harry paced in the Snape’s living room, while his friends watched nervously. Finally Remus broke the silence.

“Harry, have you calmed down now?”

“Wha...? Oh Remus, I was never that angry. Yes, I’m angry that it came to this. But most of what I said in Dumbledore’s office wasn’t said in anger.”

Remus blinked in surprise. “Well, you sure sounded angry to me. You practically declared open war on the Order tonight by questioning Dumbledore’s commitment and then threatening Moody.”

“I know I did Remus, but someone has to knock some sense into them. Just how effective have they been in the last ten months? How many Death Eaters has either the Order or the Aurors captured? Six? Ten? It’s a drop in the bucket to what’s coming our way in barely a month’s time.”

Severus spoke quietly, “Harry, you know that the Headmaster will probably be working hard to figure out what you’re up to at this point. The DA came very close to revealing itself tonight.”

Harry ran his fingers through his hair. “I know we did. But by the same token, we couldn’t have sat back and done nothing either. We’ll just have to take extra precautions. I expect Mad-Eye will be roaming around under an invisibility cloak in the castle. Ron, get together with Blaise. Let’s give Moody a major case of frustration. You know the charms to use.”

Ron grinned wickedly at Harry.

Turning to the four adults Harry said, “I would like to thank you for your support. I know that you’re putting yourself in jeopardy with the Order over this, and I wish that weren’t the case. But until Dumbledore comes to grips with the idea that this is a war, we’re never going to see eye to eye, I’m afraid.

“In any event, in a little over a months time, Dumbledore will either be on board, or pushed to the sidelines.”

Their meeting broke up shortly after that.

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### **The lurkers...**

Classes were cancelled for several days, following the attack. Aurors interviewed a number of students and checked wands for prior spells. Slowly, things returned to normal, but for anyone looking hard enough, the subtle changes were evident.

Professor McGonagall seemed torn as her loyalties were divided. She was clearly supporting Dumbledore, but she had to admit that Harry’s arguments were valid. In the end, she opted to distance herself from both sides, by adopting a cold formality when dealing with everyone. Harry, in particular, was saddened by this breach with his Head of House. He had always liked her and her distance hurt him.

Moody did spend quite a bit of time lurking about the castle. However, things were not to his liking. For one thing, an inordinate amount of students seemed to be able to spot him through his invisibility cloak and numerous illusion charms. His nerves were in tatters after only a few days, as student after student stopped to tell him hello while he tried to sneak around the castle.

If that weren’t enough of an insult, he found himself constantly on the receiving end of minor pranks. On one particularly bad day, he had the length of his peg leg changed forty two times.

Harry and Dumbledore did not meet, nor speak. As the month wound down and the DA went into even more intensive training, the breach became obvious to everyone in the school. Harry continued to work closely with the Snapes and occasionally, Remus would visit, delivering advice or reading material from Jack Parsons. The pressure continued to mount on everyone. The DA knew the attack was coming but so were the OWLS and NEWTS.

It was Ginny and Hermione who finally stepped in. Both had learned that Harry was spending all but five hours per night training or pouring over old books, looking for things to improve their chances. His eyes were baggy looking, with dark circles under them. Over his objections, Ginny and Hermione called for a five day break in DA training. Harry objected, but finally agreed when all of his friends explained the need for it. People were beginning to burn out.

The DA could take the time off. But in Harry's mind, that didn't mean he was going to take the time off from his own training. With Dumbledore no longer controlling his opponents in the Room of Requirement, he was forced to increase the power and lethality of the spells used by his adversaries. And while they could never cast a killing curse, they were casting just about everything else at him.

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### **Room of Requirement, late night, beginning of May...**

Ginny was very worried. So were the rest of Harry's friends. He spent most of his time training. The few times they did see him he looked terrible. Finally, Ginny had Ron pinch Harry's invisibility cloak for her. She was going to confront him, whether he liked it or not!

It was after midnight when she silently slipped into the Room of Requirement. Harry must have heard her anyway, because he turned to look at her. That was all it took, a momentary distraction and one of his opponents hit him with a Cruciatus curse. Harry crumpled to the floor and whimpered while his opponents and the shields faded away.

Ginny watched silently. She wanted to run to him, but wouldn't, not this time. She had to make him see. She removed the cloak and held it in her arms.

Slowly Harry got to his feet. He swayed slightly and looked at her questioningly.

"Harry, change the room to something more comfortable so we can talk, please," she said softly.

Harry transformed the room. It was now the same room they had shared their romantic dinner in. She smiled briefly and waited for him to take a place on the couch before sitting down a few feet away from him. He looked surprised by that, and a little hurt.

"Gin?"

She spoke in a soft voice. "Harry, when we insisted that the DA take time off, we also meant that you stop as well. Instead, you've increased your training schedule, and increased the number of dangerous spells you're letting your opponents use.

“Ron’s hacked off at you, and Hermione is scared senseless that you’re going to kill yourself. Both Neville and Luna are worried as well. Even the Snapes can see you’re pushing yourself too hard.” She took a deep breath before continuing.

“You’re killing yourself training like this, and it’s killing me to see you do this to yourself. I hear you come in at night. I see you limping to your bed, exhausted, sometimes too tired to even heal your own cuts. Look at you Harry. You’re sitting there, trembling from the after effects of a Cruciatus curse! I don’t know how much more of this I can take. I won’t stand around and watch you kill yourself.”

He stiffened and scowled at her. “You don’t understand. I have to be ready for this, Ginny. Even you have to see that!”

She stood and walked over to him. Grabbing him by the chin, she pulled his face up to look into her eyes. “You’ve been ready for months. If you keep training like this, you lose the edge you have.” Seeing his doubt at her words, and the annoyance in his gaze, she sighed heavily.

“You have a choice Harry, and it’s a simple one. You either stop training and rest for the next couple of weeks, or I’ll give you back your ring and let you go about your life. I’m serious about this. I don’t want to lose you...not to Voldemort, or your own stupidity. If you continue to train, you’ll do it without my help or me in your life. I won’t watch you kill yourself.”

“You’d leave me?”

“If you don’t get your head out of your ass, yes. You’re not a selfish person, Harry. But you asked me to marry you and we’ve made plans to build a life together when this is over. If you kill yourself, what happens to me, to our plans? Can’t you see? This isn’t just about you anymore. It’s about both of us, working to build a life together.

When Ginny had first started speaking, all Harry heard was that she was going to leave him. As understanding slowly sank in, he went limp. Everything she’d said was true, he could see that now.

He shuddered. “I’ll stop Gin, I don’t want to lose you... I couldn’t live without you...” he said in a hoarse whisper.

“I knew you had your head on straight Mr. Potter. Now then, since tomorrow is a Saturday, cast a locking charm and a silencing charm on that door and change this couch into a bed. I’m going to make sure you start getting your sleep!” She said with a smile.

He did as he was told, then he cast a cleaning charm on himself. It wasn’t quite as good as a hot shower, but it did the trick. He had conjured a bed similar to the one he had at Grimmauld Place, which was big enough for four people. He didn’t have his pajamas on him and for some reason he didn’t think to conjure any. He just peeled down to his boxers and slipped under the blankets.

In the light cast by the fireplace, he watched Ginny slip out of her robe. She wasn’t wearing anything special, just a cotton nightshirt, but to him she still looked like an angel. She slipped under the blankets and nestled up beside him, her head resting on his shoulder. He kissed the top of her head gently, murmuring, “Thank you”

She looked up at him curiously. "For what, Harry?"

But he had already fallen asleep.

Nearly eight hours later, Harry woke. During the night, he and Ginny had shifted positions and they were spooning, her back pressed into him. Harry had an arm wrapped around her, his nose in her hair.

He began to softly kiss the back of her neck. She sighed in her sleep and shifted a little closer to him. Harry was a little embarrassed, his arousal was clearly evident and the pressure her ass put on him wasn't helping.

He continued to kiss along the nape of her neck while he slid his hand up to cup one of her breasts. She was waking now, a dreamy smile on her face as she leaned back into him, allowing him more of her neck to kiss. She grabbed his hand and pressed it firmly to her breast. Through the thin material, his fingers swirled around her nipple.

His kisses along her neck were driving her crazy. Each place where his lips touched flared with tingly warmth. She sat up long enough to pull her nightshirt off before lying back down next to him. Although Harry had seen her like this before, the sight always stunned him.

With a trembling hand, he reached out to touch her cheek whispering, "You are so beautiful Gin."

Her heart skipped a beat at that. He seemed to have a strange power over her body. Every time he called her 'Gin' in that husky tone of his, her body melted.

He leaned over to kiss her softly and she wrapped her arms about him. His kiss deepened and became more passionate. She felt his tongue questing for her own. She longed for his touch, everywhere. He was nearly lying on top of her and, when she realized that it was his arousal she felt pressing against her thigh, she arched against him.

He slowly slid down her, kissing her neck, pausing to nuzzle at her breasts, gently biting and kissing each nipple. When he heard her whimper, he moved lower still, caressing her hips while he kissed her. Finally lying between her legs, he bent down and pressed his mouth up against her panties, exhaling heavily.

Ginny's mind whirled as she felt the warmth of his breath.

Stripping off the annoying garment, he kissed her, causing her entire body to shudder with pleasure. She reached down with both hands and curled her fingers into his hair. She gasped as she felt his tongue slid into her, her back arched as she tried to thrust her hips closer to him. She pulled his head closer, shuddering as he worked his tongue over her most pleasurable of places. Just as she thought it couldn't get any better, it did as he worked a finger deep into her.

It took only a few minutes of this before she climaxed, her body thrashing about. Still holding onto his hair, she pulled him up into an embrace. He held her tightly, nibbling on her neck while the aftershocks of her orgasm rippled through her.

Eventually, Ginny regained contact with the outside world and looked up at him. He was watching her carefully. She reached up tenderly, pressing her hand to his cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned into her caress.

“Someone had been studying his lessons I see,” she murmured with a smile.

Pushing him over to his back and straddling him, she then proved that he wasn’t the only one who’d been studying that particular chapter.

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### **The next night...**

Over the protests of everyone, Harry called a DA meeting for the following night. Ginny was ready to hex him and Hermione wouldn’t speak to him at all that day.

Harry waited calmly for everyone to file in. He knew exactly what he had to do. Dumbledore was still breathing down his neck, trying to find out what he was up to.

When the room filled up, he looked out over a sea of confused and somewhat angry faces. He watched the Snapes file in, the last people to arrive. He stepped up to the front of the crowd and began to speak.

“Over the past months you’ve all trained long and hard. Put in long hours, trying to balance the DA with school. As we got closer to May, I pushed you guys as hard as I could and myself even harder.”

His voice lowered. “I’m truly sorry that I’ve made you guys go through all this, and even sorrier that we’ll all be forced to test ourselves in battle before this month is out.”

He paused, looking at his friends, his DA.

“I was wrong to push you guys so hard. In doing so, I endangered you all. I think that perhaps it’s time for someone else to lead the DA. If you want to have someone new selected, see Hermione and she’ll collect your choices.”

Hermione looked startled at this. Ginny frowned at Harry.

Harry walked off the dais. Ginny following him and grabbed him by the arm. “What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing, Harry?”

“Look Gin, you were right. I was pushing people too hard. I forgot the number one rule of command; take care of your people. I let myself become so focused on the goal that I endangered the lives of everyone. They deserve better than that Gin. It’s in their hands now. Whatever happens, they’ll be ready for it.”

Ginny shook her head. “Harry how is it you and instill such confidence in others, and yet you have so little in yourself?”

He didn’t know how to answer that question.

Hermione was conferring with a number of people. Finally she approached Harry and Ginny.

“They’ve made their choice known Harry. I think you should announce it to them.”

He walked back to the center of the dais with Hermione and Ginny following.

Looking out at his friends he said, “Hermione tells me I should announce the next DA Leader...”

Hermione handed him a folded slip of parchment. He unfolded it and read ‘Harry James Potter’.

He stiffened and his eyes widened. When Ginny took his hand, he looked out at the faces before him, at a loss for words.

From the crowd came Blaise Zabini’s voice. “You may be a grungy Gryffindor Potter, but you’ve gotten us this far! And you better take us all the way!”

Hermione came up to stand next to Harry. He wrapped an arm around both of his favorite witches.

“OK DA, you’ve made your choice, so here’s what we’re going to do. Until the day of the attack, we’re standing down. No meetings, no practices. I’ll ask you to keep up with your early morning runs, and if you want to practice I won’t stop you. I want everyone to get plenty of rest. However, for tonight, we’re going to do something different!”

He altered the room right in front of them. There was a momentary dizziness as the combat areas vanished to be replaced by a long table, full of food and drinks along one wall. Smaller, more intimate tables dotted the room. Some music was playing in the background, its source not evident.

“Tonight folks, we party! We’ve earned it.”

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## **Chapter 14    O.W.L.S. N.E.W.T.S and War.**

### **Insanity Reigns Supreme...**

It was that time of year once again. The school classes were winding down and those in their OWL and NEWT years were exploding with panic. Both Neville and Harry were quickly becoming convinced that their girlfriends had gone crazy.

The normally quiet and slightly dizzy Luna had taken to throwing books at Neville every time he tried to talk to her. Ginny had hit Harry with an elephant ears hex one night, simply because he tried to console her when she had burst into tears over the amount of homework they were still giving her.

Harry tried to help where he could. He gave them both enchanted quills that wrote their essays, all they had to do was speak, or even think to the quill. It wasn’t enough. The two girls had reached such heights of insanity that both boys had taken to avoiding them entirely. The last time Neville



saw Luna, she had hurled a flower hex at him that, if it had hit, would have turned his hair to flowers.

The girls had made it plainly clear that they wanted no distractions, and in their case, that meant Harry and Neville. And just when it couldn't get any worse, the girls resorted to sneak snogging attacks in the hallways. Apparently the girls knew they could have any distractions, but they also wanted their men to realize they really weren't angry with them. That plan was a disaster from the start. With the girls torn between hexing the boys for being a distraction and sailing in out of the blue to snog their boyfriend senseless, the two boys were nervous wrecks.

Harry and Neville took to taking their meals down in the kitchens, much to the amusement of Ron and Hermione who watched this annual rite of passage with glee. When they weren't in the kitchen, Harry would take Neville outside and work with him on his broom flying. Neville wasn't as bad as Hermione when it came to flying, but he was a nervous flyer. Part of the reason for that was Neville was using his father's old Cleansweep two. It broom was all right, but it was old, somewhat unstable, and prone to veering off course suddenly.

Harry helped Neville gain more confidence by letting him use his Firebolt while Harry trailed along on the shaky Cleansweep. On a more stable and much more responsive broom, Neville quickly gain the confidence he needed to fly well. He'd never fly or handle a broom as well as Harry, but he learned to enjoy flying for the first time.

While the two spent a lot of their time flying, they weren't alone. In ones and twos, they were joined by other students who had suffered from a relationship under the threat of OWLS and NEWTS. Harry found himself in the position of helping several uncertain flyers become more proficient.

As the OWLS approached, the boys did everything possible to avoid Ginny and Luna. While the sneak snogging attacks ceased, the hexing did not. Harry had loaned Neville his invisibility cloak so he could move through the castle with impunity, while Harry used a camouflage charm or his Phoenix form to move between classes.

Harry found this really quite confusing and depressing. He was more than a bit hurt by it, especially when Ginny nailed him with her bat bogey hex for being in the Great Hall at the same time she was.

Why couldn't they just do like the other fifth year witches and *ask* their boyfriends to leave them be for a while?

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### **Gryffindor Girls Dorm, night before testing begins...**

The scene in the fifth year Gryffindor Girls Dorm room was one of total chaos. Half dressed girls were running around clutching books and asking to see each other's notes. Parchments and old homework were flying everywhere. Full panic had set in. More than a few girls had run to the bathroom to toss up their dinner. One girl was lying on her bed, weeping uncontrollably.

Ginny sat calmly on her own bed, reviewing her notes. The bed was covered in books, quills and notes. It had been a trying past few weeks and now she was coming down to the home stretch. Tomorrow morning was her Charms OWL, with Potions in the afternoon. She felt pretty

confident, but she wanted to make sure she had everything down, which is why she was sitting with one of her old first year notebooks in her lap.

Ginny looked up as Hermione open the curtain to her bed and climbed in.

“Ginny, we need to talk.”

“But Hermione I still need to study...”

“Ginny, if you don’t know the material by now, you’ll never know it. Besides you’ve got everything down pat. You’re one of the smartest witches in your year. And this is important.”

Ginny sighed and closed her book. “You’re probably right. Going over this stuff at this point isn’t going to help. So what did you want to talk about?”

Hermione shot her a funny look. “Ginny, have you seen Harry?”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “No, come to think of it, I haven’t seen Harry in a couple of days. Is something wrong? Has he started training again? If he has...”

Hermione stopped her with a raised hand. “No Ginny, he’s not training again, but he’s definitely not fine.”

“Not fine? What are you talking about Hermione?”

“You really have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

She shook her head in confusion. Hermione sighed sadly. “Ginny, you and Luna have been studying for your OWLS very hard, and you’ve made it plain to people that you want no distractions. But both you and Luna went to extreme lengths to point that fact out to Harry and Neville. Neville is running around the castle under Harry’s invisibility cloak and Harry’s been using his phoenix form to get to his classes. You two girls have hexed them both almost every time you spotted them.”

“Oh come on Hermione, it wasn’t that bad... it was just a few hexes.”

“Ginny, you’ve given Harry elephant ears and trolls feet. You’ve turned his hair into snakes! You even lengthened one of his arms enough to make it drag the on the floor. The final straw for Harry however, was the bat bogey hex. Neville isn’t in much better shape. Luna’s hex enlarged a certain part of a boy’s anatomy and was quite painful for him. In between all this, you’d find them in the hall and pin them to a wall, kissing them to a state of total frenzy, then walk away.”

Ginny rocked back against the headboard of her bed. *I didn’t do that did I?* She thought. *Oh Merlin! Bat Bogey is painful! What was I thinking?*

Hermione looked at her compassionately. “Ginny, Harry and Neville both know what it’s like going through the OWLS. They tried to give you and Luna as much support as possible and as much space as you felt you needed. Both of them are actually afraid of you two now. Neville will probably get over it easier than Harry will.”

Ginny's eyes widened as comprehension sunk in. Harry had been sent to his relatives, people that were supposed to love him, and they hurt him. Now she had done the same thing!

*She sat thinking furiously. How could I have been so stupid? I don't even remember casting a bat bogey at him! What was I thinking of? Oh Harry!*

Ginny looked at Hermione in horror as the magnitude of her actions finally hit home. She looked to her ring and gasped. It still pulsated softly, but the glow was fainter than before. She had weakened the bind!

Her shoulders shook as she began to cry. "Mione, how can I fix this? He must hate me now!"

Hermione spoke to the younger girl gently, "The ring still glows Ginny, as long it glows he doesn't hate you. But you do need to see him, talk to him, and even apologize to him. I've spoken to Ron and told him, in no uncertain terms, that he is not to interfere with you tonight. Mind you, I'm not suggesting you go shag his brains out, but you two need to work this out. He's in his dorm, probably in bed by now. He's hurting badly and you're the reason for it."

Ginny looked at Hermione the plea evident on her face. "Mione, I don't... I'm not sure I can face him alone. I did to him what those damn Dursleys did."

Hermione rolled her eyes at this. "Don't get too dramatic, Gin. Sure, you weren't very nice to him and you did a few really awful things, but you're not the Dursley's, for Merlin's sake. That being said, you still have to fix this. Harry is a tough, proud man, but he knows so little of what it's like to love or be loved. The feelings he has for you are his anchor. Without you, he could turn his back on our world and the muggle one, letting Voldemort take them both. He still loves you Ginny, but you've confused him and hurt him, and he doesn't know how to deal with it. He has no real experience with love Ginny.

"I've tried talking to him about it. So has Ron. He almost understood what we were saying, and then you hit him with the bogeys. Since then, he's shut us both out, refusing to talk or listen to either Ron or myself. He and Neville are clinging together during the daytime, but neither really understands what's going on."

She slumped her shoulders in defeat, "I'll go talk to him. I won't be able to study anymore tonight anyway, not after this."

"Good. You do what it takes to make him understand how you feel Ginny. I'll speak to Luna in the morning."

Slipping on a robe, she padded barefoot down the stairs of the girl's dorm and up the stairs to Harry's. Most of the beds were closed off with the privacy curtains. Ron looked up from his bed and gave her a weak smile, then nodded towards Harry's bed. A light burned from behind the curtains, the only sign of it being occupied.

Nodding to her brother, she walked over to Harry's bed and, pulling the curtain back a little, she crawled in and cast a silencing charm.

Harry sat at the top of the bed, dressed in boxers and eyeing her warily. Since that time Ginny's in the Room of Requirement, he had stopped wearing pajamas to bed.

"What do you want Ginevra? Here to hex me again?" he asked, his tone void of any emotion.

Ginny flinched inwardly to hear herself spoken to in such a monotone. "Harry, can we talk?" she asked in a soft tone.

She moved up closer to him and he flinched back slightly. *He's flinching from me?* She thought. Her heart was breaking.

She looked down at her hands, unable to meet his eyes. "Harry, I-I'm s-s-so so-sorry, I never meant to hurt you. Things just got so crazy with studying for the OWLS..."

She started to cry softly. There was a long silence that tore at her even more.

"You hurt me Ginevra. I tried to help you. I tried to stay out of your way and every time I turned around you were hexing me," he said softly, his own tears not far away.

Fighting for control Ginny gasped a few times, "I-I-I kn-know Harry, I'm sorry..."

"Is this what's it's really about? Is this what love is really like? The hexes were only physical pain. I'm used to that. But being hexed by someone who says she loves me? I felt empty, dead inside."

"It's not to suppose to be like that Harry. I was stupid, and selfish. I hurt you without thinking about what I was doing. If you want, I'll give you back your ring and leave." She choked out that last part and then started crying again.

"NO! Gin... Gin, please don't leave, I don't... I can't... without you, I don't think I'd be human anymore. You keep me connected... just please... don't hurt me again like that."

She looked at him through her tears, afraid to make move towards him. Suddenly his hands gripped her by her shoulders and pulled her into his embrace. He held her tightly, her head on his shoulders and she wept for what she had done.

"Shhh... Gin, it will be ok." He laid his own head on top of hers, holding her while she cried. Finally she calmed and looked up at him. He smiled, his own face tear streaked as he looked at her.

"It did hurt Gin, it hurt a lot. But I can't stay angry with anyone, especially you. You know that. It's ok love, I forgive you."

His soft words echoed in her mind. He forgave her; she could see that in his eyes. She had to admit to herself that she didn't know if she could be so forgiving. For the millionth time she marveled at how gentle he could be, considering his upbringing.

"Harry, get under the blanket..."

“But Gin? We’re in...”

“Hush Harry, we’re going to sleep only. Besides, Ron will cover for us.”

She slid under the covers next to him, wrapping her arms around him. They lay like that for a long while, foreheads touching, sometimes talking, sometimes giggling, and even occasionally kissing. Eventually, they fell asleep. Ginny never noticed that her ring was pulsating even more brightly than ever.

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### **Hogwarts, Great Hall, breakfast before the start of OWLS and NEWTS...**

Harry and Ginny entered the Great Hall late. Ron had told them to wait until Seamus, Neville and Dean had left the dorm room before getting up. Then Harry had to wait for Ginny to run up to her room and get dressed.

That sat in their usual spots at the Gryffindor table with Ron across from them. Hermione was off talking to Luna at the Ravenclaw table. Luna kept glancing over at Neville, looking more and more distressed, as Hermione kept talking to her.

Harry gave Hermione a curious look when she finally rejoined them. She was looking far too pleased with herself.

“Watch Luna,” Hermione said as she started to fill her plate.

Luna stood up and walked over to the Gryffindor Table. She stopped behind Neville, who was talking to Seamus and still hadn’t noticed her. She reached out with one hand and hesitantly touched him on his shoulder. Startled, he swung around on the bench until he faced her. She wasn’t wearing her usual dreamy expression. Today it seemed a little sad, a little more in touch with the world.

When Luna reached out to caress Neville cheek, he grabbed her and held her tightly. She wrapped her arms about his head, cradling it against her breasts. Neville had a wonderful smile on his face. Luna glanced over to Hermione and winked.

Harry shot Hermione a suspicious look. “You playing peacemaker, ‘Mione? I don’t...”

Ginny laid a hand on his thigh, and he paused.

Hermione shrugged. “Let’s just say I kicked a few butts that needing kicking.”

*Oh thank you Hermione! He thought. Just what I need for some payback on Ginny!*

“Funny, I didn’t see any bruises other than my teeth marks on you last night Ginny. Remind me to check that area more carefully for bruises next time,” he said with a smirk.

Ginny, who was in the process of drinking her pumpkin juice, sprayed it all over Ron and the table between them. Hermione looked shocked for a moment before she started giggling. Ron sat dripping and muttering vile threats at Ginny.

Ginny glared at Harry, but her gaze softened when he smirked at her saying, “Payback for your bat bogey.” Seeing her sad look, he changed the subject. “So, what’s your OWL schedule like?”

“Charms this morning and Potions in the afternoon. Tomorrow is Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. Wednesday is Transfiguration and Herbology. Thursday is DADA, and Care of Magical Creatures. Friday is History of Magic and Astronomy.”

“Very well Miss Weasley, I will make sure I am not around to distract you this...”

He stopped as Ginny grabbed him by the ear and gave it a sharp yank down, bring him to eye level. “Don’t you dare Harry Potter. I expect to see you everyday and I won’t stand for you running from me again! Is that clear?”

Harry blinked in surprise at his little red head. *Damn she’s pretty when she’s mad!* He thought which brought a smile to his face.

Still holding his ear she ground her teeth at his smile. “What are you smiling at Harry? I’m serious!”

“I was just thinking about how you get even prettier when you’re angry. It’s actually kind of sexy,” he said, starting to chuckle.

Ginny’s face ran a gamut of emotions from elation to anger to embarrassment over his remark before surrendering to the inevitable. She smiled back and leaned into him, wrapping her arms around him.

“How about you Harry? This is finals week, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m not too worried about finals, not like I was about OWLS or will be about NEWTS. I do have another meeting tonight with the Professors Snape in their apartment about some personal stuff. They are going to try to help me figure out why I’m stuck using a glamour at the moment.”

---

### **An Evening with the Snapes...**

After finishing dinner and calming an over excited red head who was convinced she had passed both her Charms and Potions OWLS with good scores, Harry left for his evening appointment.

Arriving at the Snape’s apartment, he was greeted by his unsmiling DADA Professor.

Nodding in welcome, Severus stepped aside. “Come in, Harry. Mrs. Snape is in the living room setting up some tea, I believe.”

Harry entered the living room and greeted Mrs. Snape before sitting down. Severus took a seat next to him.

“Harry, I’ve been thinking about this power problem of yours and the glow.” Severus began. “Researching this sort of problem is quite difficult because it’s happened to so few people over

the millennia. The only two people we know for certain that had this sort of problem are Godric Gryffindor and Merlin himself. And to be honest, little exists from either of them. But the records clearly state they had a similar problem that they solved by their twentieth year. I don't think they used the glamour as a solution for this problem. Serena has some interesting ideas about it."

Harry nodded, and then turned to look at Serena.

"Harry, one thing did catch my eye and I'm not sure it's significant, but it could be a clue," Serena began. "Historical references to both Godric Gryffindor and Merlin refer to the men having an almost golden hued tan to their skin. I can't help but wonder if they somehow managed to channel their glow through their skin somehow?"

*Channel the glow through the skin? He thought. Now that has some possibilities. But how?*

"That's an interesting idea Professor. I might try that and see how it works."

"Harry, the other thing I'm wondering about is the amount of energy you seem to have available. Severus tells me that you first found it steadily available after your meeting in the Headmaster's office with the Ministry representatives. I'm not sure I understand, but Severus said you had an instinctual break through during that meeting."

Harry nodded replying, "It's hard to explain Professor, but I'll see if I can. In the past, my magic seemed to ebb and flow...rather like a tide. When I got angry, or when I was upset, the amount of power available would become immense and mostly uncontrollable. But after I regained control of my emotions, my magic would flow back down to more normal levels. After that meeting in the Headmaster's office, the magic didn't recede. It was like a huge dam holding back the magic, always there, always ready for me to tap into."

"And the level of magic behind that dam rose during the fight in the Great Hall?" Serena asked gently.

"Yes! That's exactly what happened! I heard your scream and I could feel it grow again. I very nearly fainted from that."

"Harry, not to change the subject, but what do you know about muggle dams?"

Harry blinked. *Muggle dams? I didn't even know muggles had dams! He thought. What does this have to do with my magic, or the glow?*

"Um... not much I'm afraid, Professor. My relatives rarely let me watch TV, and never took me anywhere."

Serena smiled at him. "That's alright, Harry. The summer after I graduated from school, a group of witches that I graduated with took a tour of the United States for a couple weeks. One of the places we visited was muggle dam called the Hoover Dam. Now, I'm telling you this for a reason, so pay attention. One of the things I learned about that dam was that it had something called a spillway, that prevented the water from putting too much pressure on the dam and breaking it. It allowed excess water to pass over the dam. I'm coming to think that your glow is sort of an

uncontrolled spillway for you. If I'm right, then your glamour is not only the wrong solution but a bad idea, as it's giving you a false sense of security."

"But professor, I can't walk around school glowing all the time. It's bad enough I get stared at because of the scar. Imagine what it would be like if I were glowing." He shuddered at the idea.

"I'm not saying to stop using the glamour Harry. All I'm saying is don't come to rely on it. Your body needs to find a way of channeling the excess energy properly. The glamour isn't controlling it; it's merely hiding it from view."

"I understand Professor. I'll see what I can do and, if I get stuck, I'll ask Hermione for help. She loves this sort of research project. Oh, and that reminds me. Before I leave tonight, I'd like to get a full set of the mode crystals, including the attack and removal crystals. I'm not sure I'll need them, but I want to keep a set on me, just in case."

Serena stood up and went into the lab. She returned a moment later with a small leather box and handed it to him. The box was engraved with the Potter Family crest on the front and the top had the crest of the Gryffindor house. He raised an eyebrow at her.

She gave him an appraising look and said, "I'm not just a potions mistress Harry. I like working with my hands also. I made this for you. It has a sticking charm on it so it will stick to your belt, and it's charmed to be fireproof."

He opened the box to see the crystals neatly lined up. The blue-yellow attack crystal off to one side in its own little compartment. The workmanship was exquisite. He gave her a shy smile and thanked her.

Severus leaned forward. "Harry, we've never tried the attack crystal. It could use as much power as the removal stone. I'd suggest using it only in the direst of emergencies."

"I know Professor. I'm not really planning on using it unless given no choice," he replied seriously.

Harry thanked them for their help and bid them both a good night before leaving the apartment.

Back in the Gryffindor common room, Harry took a seat on the couch in front of the fire. His mind still lost in thought, considering what the Snapes had told him about the glamour. He never even noticed when Ginny sat next to him, nor did he notice when she put his arm about her shoulder.

"Harry?"

"Hmmm?"

"Where are you Harry? I've been sitting here for five minutes now and you've never even noticed me."

"I'm sorry love. I was just thinking about something Professor Snape told me tonight. How do you think I'd look with a tan?"



“A tan? What are you talking about Harry? Your skin is almost as fair as my own. You’ll burn, not tan.”

“I do burn Ginny, but Professor Snape said tonight that the only two people on record that had a glowing problem like mine ended up with a golden hued tan when they fixed the problem.”

The image of a golden hued Harry flashed through Ginny’s mind and it caused flutters in her stomach. *Not now! Owls! Remember Owls!* She chanted silently to herself.

“Um... I think you’d look really nice Harry,” she said, still trying to get the image from her mind.

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### **A mistake is made...**

The four friends found themselves sitting around the breakfast table at the beginning of the third day of the OWLS. Ginny felt fairly confident that she had done well and she had made an effort to spend some time with Harry every evening. Harry had helped by quizzing her on the subjects for the next day’s exams.

At the moment, Harry and Ginny were listening with amusement to Hermione and Ron bargain over the number of kids they planned on having. Ron started the bargaining by saying he wanted a large family, at least eight kids.

Hermione choked on her drink, nearly spraying Harry, and countered with an offer of one child. Ron said a larger family provided for a more stable, loving environment for the children, and then lowered his offer to seven. Hermione pointed out that she was an only child and asked him pointedly if he felt she was unstable in anyway. Then she upped her offer to two.

Harry leaned over to Ginny. “I bet they’ll settle at four,” he whispered.

She nodded her head in agreement. Harry was forced away from the battle of the babies when an owl came to land in from of him. Another owl landed in front of Ginny.

Harry removed the letter from the owl and, after feeding it some bacon, sent it on its way. He was about to open his letter when he heard Ginny shriek next to him.

“THOSE BLOODY BROTHERS! I CAN’T BELIEVE THEY’D DO THIS TO ME DURING THE BLOODY OWLS!”

Harry turned to see a pair of very fuzzy, pink bunny slippers on the table in front of his girlfriend.

“Gin? What’s wrong? All I see are a pair of bunny slippers.”

“Harry, those aren’t just bunny slippers! Those are Follow-Me squeaking slippers. They will follow me everywhere today, squeaking with every step I take!”

Harry chuckled. “Gin, that’s nothing compared to what’s going to happen to them. Don’t you remember the curse we put on their blood contract?”

Her eyes gleamed evilly. “Oh, you are so right!”

Hermione broke in at that point. “What are you two talking about? What blood contract?”

Harry grinned and jumped at the opportunity. ““Mione I’m surprised at you. Haven’t you figured it out yet?”

“Figured out what Harry?” She said in exasperation.

“Remember when the twins got pranked in the Great Hall back in March?”

“Yes I remember. The Marauders and the New Marauders pulled that stunt. I know Remus is part of the old Marauders but... no!”

“Yep! Wings is a member of the New Marauders, as is Ginny... and Luna... We haven’t given them names, since they haven’t mastered their animagus form yet, but I’m sure they’ll get to it soon enough. Didn’t you notice we came in late? We were the ones in the black robes.”

Ron was staring at Harry and Ginny, bug eyed. “You’re the ones that filled the Slytherin Common room to the ceiling with sand? And put that reverse sex charm on the Hufflepuff door? And replaced the Ravenclaw Quidditch team brooms with rubber brooms? That was bloody brilliant!”

Hermione was looking put out with them both over keeping this secret for so long.

“Yeah Ron, but if you tell anyone, I’ll fix it so you can use your tongue as a necktie! My point is, the twins signed a binding blood contract stating they would never prank a Marauder or New Marauder again. And right about now, they are discovering the penalty for violating that contract.”

Ginny looked at her slippers and laughed a very evil laugh.

Harry turned back to his mail. Opening the envelope, he found two letters, one from Molly and Arthur and another from Percy of all people! Turning to Molly’s letter, he read it first.

*Dear Harry,*

*I cannot express the joy it gives me to write this letter. Two days ago, Percy returned to the Burrow. He was upset, asking if he was still welcome here. He had quit his job with the Ministry. It took quite a bit of talking and questioning, but he finally admitted that he had wronged us and it was you who had pointed out the error of his ways.*

*Harry dear, I don’t know what you said to him. But you’ve made our family whole again. We are truly blessed; in the past year we gained a new son and regained one we thought lost to us.*

*When Percy found out I was writing you a letter, he asked me to include his with mine. He’s feeling bit ashamed of himself, but I think he’s going to be fine.*

*Love*

*Molly & Arthur*

Harry passed his letter over to Ginny while he read Percy's letter.

*Harry,*

*I find myself faced with writing a very difficult letter to you. Your comments to me in Dumbledore's office led me to realize that family IS everything. The love and devotion you showed for our family, and your willingness to forgive me, made me realize that I've been so wrong about you in all ways. Mum tells me you intend to marry Ginny. A year ago, I would have been willing to knock your lights out, and I would have been wrong. You've shown yourself to be a better man than I am Harry, and it shames me to say that. My parents raised me with the values that seem to come naturally to you.*

*I ask that you forgive me for what I said about you, in Dumbledore's office and elsewhere. I was wrong and I am sorry.*

*Your Brother*

*Percy*

*PS. I can't think of a finer man for Ginny. Good Show!*

Harry waited for a moment for Ginny to catch her breath and calm down. Her parent's letter left her very emotional. With a nod from Harry, she passed the letter to Ron and he gave her Percy's letter.

Ginny leaned over to Harry and squeezed him. Her family was together again and there were no words capable of expressing how happy that made her feel.

Ginny got up from the table and headed off to her next OWL exam. A pair of bunny slippers following her, making a loud squeak with every step they took.

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### **The Twins discover their mistake...**

Moments after Ginny opened the letter from the twins, the two young men in question were opening their shop for the day. Business was good and they expected that, once Hogwarts let out for the summer, it would get even better. With the restriction on underage magic, the kids would be buying enchanted pranks to make up for what they couldn't do themselves during the summer.

They were surprised by a knock at the door and just a little apprehensive when they saw Remus and Tonks standing outside their shop. Fred opened the door to allow them to enter, and then placed the 'Open' sign in the window.

George, noticing the large grin on Remus' face, gripped the counter. He liked Remus, but the smile on his face wasn't an easy, friendly sort of expression.

"Good Morning Gentlemen!" Remus exclaimed as he walked up to the counter. "I wonder if by chance you ever got around to reading your copy of the magical blood contract you signed with the Marauders and the New Marauders?" he asked, innocently.

"Of course we read it," George said.

“It said we couldn’t prank them again, or we would suffer the consequences,” Fred explained.

“And we haven’t pranked anyone,” George continued, firmly.

“Well there was Ginny...”

“...but we know Ginny can’t be a Marauder...”

Both of the twins turned to the other with a look of horror. Sure Ginny couldn’t be a Marauder, but...a New Marauder?

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to the consequences,” Remus replied cheerfully to the horror-stricken duo.

Suddenly, there was a large shadow in the street outside and someone screamed. A large troll appeared outside the shop and tried to enter it through the door. But the doorway was far too small for the troll.

The troll shrugged and the doorframe broke free from the building in a shower of plaster. It entered the shop through the gaping hole it had created and approached the terrified twins.

Raising enormous hands, it poked each twin in the chest with a ham sized finger, growling, “Yous did wrong! Yous mush pay!”

As the twins clutched each other, the troll lifted a hand to both their heads and daintily plucked a single hair. Flinching, they turned wide, shocked eyes to Remus.

“Gentlemen, I have been instructed to inform you that the troll will pluck a hair from your head every ten minutes. I did manage to convince my friends to start with the top of your heads, however. It was their inclination to start with ah... shall we say, more private areas, before starting on your heads. The New Marauders have further instructed me to tell you that the troll will continue plucking hairs until you are totally bald. Then, it will start plucking other body hair.

“However, after two days, you can stop the troll by agreeing to cooperate with the New Marauders on a little project they have in mind for you. All you need do is floo me on the second day with your agreement and the troll will leave you be. Should you opt not to cooperate, once you are hairless, the troll will start plucking extremities - fingers, arms that sort of thing. Good day boys.”

Remus and Tonks walked from the shop, stepping over the ruins of the door. They managed to contain themselves until they reached the street. Once there, they hurried to the Leaky Cauldron, laughing loudly.

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### **Somewhere in England, Location unknown...**

Voldemort was gleeful. His planning and efforts were about to pay off!

Despite the failures at Hogwarts, his attacks elsewhere had managed to scatter the Auror forces all over the country. There was no way they would be able to gather in time.

“Send in Wormtail,” he sneered to a servant.

The fat man came scurrying into the chamber and groveled at his master’s feet.

“Wormtail... is everything ready?” asked Voldemort.

Wormtail groveled before his master and whined. “Not quite Master. Malfoy reports his force is being slow to gather, due to Ministry interference with the floo network. He begs to report that he expects to be fully assembled in less than an hour. The first attack group is ready to depart at your pleasure, my lord!”

“Send in the first group and tell Malfoy that he has a half hour or I will take my displeasure out on him personally.”

“Yes my lord, it will be as you command.”

Wormtail backed out of the room bowing all the way.

Bored, Voldemort turned to one of the always-present sycophants and muttered, “Crucio”.

*Life is good*, he thought while he tortured the Death Eater for the fun of it.

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### **Hogsmeade Train Station...**

The Hogsmeade station didn’t see a lot of train traffic. There was the twice-daily wizard commuter and it was a favorite apparation point. The stationmaster had an easy job, with only two trains a day. The only time he really had to work was during the arrival and departure of the Hogwarts Express.

As no trains were due, he was working in his office, and was surprised to hear the sound of people apparating in. A lot of people by the sound of it, and they just kept coming. Being curious, he stepped outside his office, then onto the platform and froze.

A voice yelled, “AVADA KEDAVRA!”

In a flash of green, the Hogsmeade stationmaster slumped to the ground, lifeless.

Seff Johnson was a newly graduated Auror. He was approaching the train station to apparate back to the ministry when he saw the unmistakable flash of green light from a killing curse. He then spotted a black robed figure, duck behind the building. Knowing he was probably out numbered

and not experienced enough, he did the smart thing. He ran all the way back to Hogsmeade, where he met up with Senior Auror Shacklebolt and stammered out his warning.

“Death Eaters, assembling at the train station!” He gasped.

“I’ll send the alert signal. You get up to the school and warn the Headmaster!” Shacklebolt ordered.

Seff nodded and took off for the school at a full run while Shacklebolt sent two alert signals, one to the Order and one to the Ministry.

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### **Hogwarts, Great Hall, last day of the OWLS/NEWTs...**

Harry and his friend were enjoying their breakfast on the last day of the OWLS. Harry was actually looking forward to the OWLS ending so he’d get his girlfriend back, hopefully with her sanity fully restored.

There was a commotion at the entrance to the Great Hall. Harry turned to watch a man he didn’t know, but clearly wearing an Auror’s uniform, run into the hall. He got about half way to the head table when he stopped, panting heavily.

Summoning his breath he shouted, “HOGSMEADE IS UNDER ATTACK! DEATH EATERS MASSING AT THE TRAIN STATION!”

The man stood panting in the center aisle, his gaze fixed on Dumbledore, the hope clear on his face. His shouted warning still echoed in the hall. Student’s looked around fearfully.

“Attention please,” Dumbledore called. Everyone turned to stare in his direction.

“Madam Pomfrey, Professors Sprout and Snape, you will remain here. All of the remaining teachers will accompany me. Classes and tests are cancelled today and all students are to remain here in the hall.”

With that, Dumbledore hurriedly left the Great Hall, teachers close behind.

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### **Hogsmeade, train station...**

The Death Eaters continued to apparate in. Less than half of them were present and Voldemort had given them strict orders not move into town until everyone was present.

From the town it was possible to hear the sound of screams of panic as the folk of Hogsmeade tried to flee.

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### **Grimmauld Place...**

An alarm shrieked through out the building. Remus and Tonks bolted from their room and ran down the staircase to the main meeting room. It was quickly filling up with people. Tonks ran to the apparation point and left for the Ministry. As an Auror, she had different duties today.

Alistair Moody had a map of Hogsmeade up against the wall. Nearby were boxes of pre-made portkeys.

“LISTEN UP! We have little time. A large band of Death Eaters has been spotted gathering at the train station. Everyone grab a box. We’ll be apparating to the west end of town. When you arrive, hand out portkeys to every civilian you see. When your box is empty, move east to support the Aurors. The Aurors will be setting up a line west of the train station to give us time to evacuate. You’ve got your orders! Move it!”

Everyone scrambled for a box of portkeys and ran to the apparation spot in the building.

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### **The Ministry of Magic, Department of Law Enforcement...**

A two-tone alarm rang through the hallways. Those Aurors sitting around on standby immediately gathered in the Ministry’s briefing room.

Amelia Bones herself, ran the speed briefing.

“We are calling in all of our Aurors, off duty and on assignment. In the meantime, we have reports of a large concentration of Death Eaters gathering at the Hogsmeade train station. They have not yet moved into the town, but it’s only a matter of time until they do. You will apparate to this position here.” She pointed to a map and the apparation coordinates appeared.

Several other Aurors slipped into the briefing room, including Tonks.

“This is roughly one hundred meters from the train station. You will form a defensive line and hold it. Civilian volunteers will be assisting in the evacuation of the town and join you as soon as the evacuation is complete. Everyone kit up. We move out in 3 minutes!”

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### **Albus Dumbledore...**

Dumbledore led his teachers down the Entrance Hall and out towards the edge of the Anti-Apparation wards. Once they arrived, they immediately apparated to the west end of the town.

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## **The Great Hall, Hogwarts...**

Professor Sprout tried to shout for everyone's attention. Many of the first years and some of the second years were panicking. Few could hear Professor Sprout, although a few prefects tried to get the kids to pay attention to her. More than a few heads turned to face Harry, waiting for the word.

Serena looked worriedly over to the Gryffindor table. Harry looked at her with a determined smile. He nodded to her, and then he climbed on top of the table.

"DA! Everyone get their gear and assemble in the Entrance Hall in three minutes! Blaise!"

Blaise Zabini stood up from the Slytherin table. "You have castle security. You know what to do." Blaise nodded and gave him a thumbs up.

Professor Sprout started to shout as the DA members ran from the room. Serena touched her on the arm. "Pomona, they won't listen to you."

"But... but where are they going Serena?"

"They are going to war Pomona. Without them, there will be no victory."

---

## **Hogsmeade Train Station...**

With nearly two hundred Death Eaters in place and waiting for the second wave, a few were caught off guard as the Aurors started apparating in. The Aurors however, had made a classic mistake of arriving in groups against a larger opposing force and arriving in the open.

Spells flew furiously and, within minutes, more than a third of the Aurors were dead. Of the remaining Aurors, more than half were injured.

Tonks cursed. They had apparated in with over a hundred and fifty. Fifty were now dead and, with more than fifty injured, their fighting strength had reached dangerously low proportions. The Station was only two hundred meters from town, and those remaining Aurors who could, were falling back to the west, still under heavy fire. Others were pinned down by Death Eaters, unable to follow their comrades and further splitting their strength.

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## **Hogwarts Entrance Hall...**

Fifty-six members of the DA formed up in squad formation in the Entrance Hall. From there, it was a mere two-minute run to the point where they would be outside of the anti-apparation wards.

Each member carried a belt, containing four of Serena Snape's Anti-Cruciatius potions, a blood replenisher and two pain relieving potions. Harry was the only one that carried an extra burden. Clipped to his belt was a box of crystals, in case he had to resort to using them.



Harry stepped over to Ginny, grabbed her in a bone crushing hug and whispered in her ear, “You be careful today!”

She nodded. “You too love!”

Harry turned to Ron and gave him the signal. Ron yelled to the group, “We’re going in using plan B. When we arrive at the apparation point, assume defensive positions. Everyone drink a Cruciatus potion!”

With that, the group moved out of the castle at a fast trot to the apparation point. Behind them, Blaise Zabini watched, wishing he could go. But he had his instructions. He nodded to his second in command, who gave a curt order. The main doors of Hogwarts swung shut and a shimmering one-way shield was put in place.

Back in the Great Hall, other Slytherin members of the DA assumed defensive positions by the doors. Once Blaise returned, the doors would be sealed and shielded.

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### **Hogsmeade West, Order of the Phoenix...**

Roughly thirty members of the Order arrived within seconds of each other. Cracking open the boxes, they started handing out portkeys to every civilian they could see. They had more than enough portkeys to evacuate all fifteen hundred civilians. The portkeys were set up to take people to a special receiving station at the Ministry of Magic. Healers from St. Mungos stood ready at the Ministry to deal with incoming wounded.

Remus Lupin was beside himself with worry. Standing in front of Gladrags, he was afraid for his wife. She was somewhere up the street with the Aurors. He continued handing out portkeys, as the sound of fighting slowly grew louder.

Now and then an Auror would come back with wounded. Remus would put a portkey around the wounded Aurors neck and send them back to the waiting healers.

Albus Dumbledore and the other Hogwarts teachers helped hand out portkeys. Dumbledore kept glancing towards the east.

More members of the Order were arriving, and it did help to ease the general sense of panic.

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### **Nymphadora Tonks...**

Tonks was one of the lucky ones. She had taken a hit to her thigh that immobilized her, but she was hidden from view behind a large rock. She watched with tears in her eyes as friends and co-workers were killed. With her wound, there was no way she could make it across the fifty meters of kill zone to the Three Broomsticks. She was pinned down and unless someone came to help her, she was going to die there.

*Remus, she thought, I'm so sorry!*

## **Hogsmeade West, Order of the Phoenix...**

Arthur and Molly Weasley had finally managed to arrive with the last of the incoming Order members. All told, fifty order members were now present. There were over five hundred civilians still to evacuate.

Dumbledore, Snape and Remus heard a loud hum coming from the east. Severus and Remus knew the source of that sound, but Dumbledore had never heard it before. His eye's narrowed, wondering what devilry the Death Eaters were up to. He started moving east to gain a better view of what was happening. Remus and Severus followed him. A moment later, Minerva McGonagall joined them.

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## **Hogsmeade Train Station...**

Like sharks smelling blood in the water, some of the Death Eaters started to push forward, in violation of their instructions. The second wave hadn't arrived yet, and the movement forward caused the other Death Eaters to lighten their fire. For a brief moment, the fire coming from the Death Eaters weakened considerably, allowing for more Aurors to pull back.

Tonks however, was still firmly pinned down since she had no one to help drag her back.

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## **The Shrieking Shack, Hogsmeade...**

"Ron, combat formation. Make sure you keep an interval of fifteen meters between squads," Harry said quietly. In the distance the sounds of fighting and people screaming could be heard.

Ron passed the word to the squad leaders. Neville took up position near the first squad in the line. Ron had the fifth squad.

Harry, Ginny, Luna and Hermione took up position next to squad three.

"SHIELDS!" Harry bellowed. The command was echoed up and down the line.

Fifteen shields snapped to life with a loud hum. One squad member controlled each shield and they extended for ten meters in either direction from the caster, four meters high. The result was each squad had three shields in a triangular area of protection. One shield to the front, and one to each side.

Harry signaled to Ron to move them away from the Shrieking Shack. "All squads! Move out maintaining fifteen meter intervals," Ron shouted.

Squad leaders barked orders and the shielder's made a slight adjustment to their shields, raising them off the ground a meter so the squads could move freely without hitting anything.

At a trot, the DA moved down from the Shrieking Shack to cut off the road between the train station and the rest of the town.

### **Hogsmeade Train Station...**

Few things can stop a madman. But if you confront a madman with a totally alien situation, he will stop to consider what he's seeing. That's exactly what the Death Eaters did when the DA moved onto the field. They were seeing something totally new.

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### **Hogsmeade Road, east of town...**

The DA came trotting from the direction of the Shrieking Shack, their shields issuing a loud hum. Once they had straddled the road, the shields were once again dropped to ground level. Now, each squad leader took over.

Each group consisted of one squad leader, five shooters, three shielders and one trained for healing. The squad leader and healer could and did double up as shooters. The shooters worked in pairs, timing their shots so that, even if one shot is deflected by a shield, the second shooter could get a shot through a weakening shield.

Roughly thirty percent of the DA members were capable of firing spells without a wand. In the first volley, fifteen Death Eaters were killed or disabled. The shields of the DA splashed and glowed with deflected shots. The shields would deflect anything but an Unforgivable curse, and they were trained to dodge those.

Harry looked over the enemy. They were outnumbered by at least three to one. And there were a number of Aurors pinned down between the DA's line and the Death Eaters.

"Covering Fire!" Harry yelled.

A second later Ron and Neville echoed the order. When the DA's firing commenced, Harry, Ginny, Luna and Hermione fired off Sun Fire spells. Normally used for Stadium night lighting, these powerful spells arced out over the DA and ignited, just in front of the line of Death Eaters. The intense glare caused by these powerful lights, and the smoke spells being fired by the DA, caused the Death Eaters to flinch back and pause in their casting.

Harry amplified his voice then yelled, "AURORS! FALL BACK AND REGROUP BEHIND OUR LINE!"

In ones and twos, Aurors scrambled behind the line set up by the DA. After several minutes, the Sun Fire spells extinguished and the smoke cleared in the morning breeze.

"Commence firing!" Harry yelled again.

Harry, Ginny, Luna and Hermione were firing spells that arced over the front line of the Death Eaters, landing to their rear in huge explosions. The DA continued to use spells none of the Death Eaters had any experience with, causing confusion in the enemy ranks.

"HARRY!"

He whirled to see Hermione pointing to prone Tonks, cowering behind a rock. He tried to apparate but it seemed the Death Eaters had erected an anti-apparation ward in the vicinity. He eyed the distance carefully. She was clearly over range for his micro-jumping capability, which could work through a ward. Using his phoenix form wasn't viable either; he'd have to expose himself too much for that.

Stepping out from behind the shield of squad three, he entered the unshielded interval between the two squads.

“ACCIO TONKS!”

He grabbed her in his arms then spun around to return behind the shield. It was at that point that a cutting hex clipped him in the calf. It wasn't a serious wound, but it would slow him down some. He handed Tonks to Luna, who pulled her out of the line of fire so she could work on her wounds. Luna dragged Tonks all the way back to Honeydukes, well out of the line of fire, before propping her up against the building wall.

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**Dumbledore...**

“AURORS! FALL BACK AND REGROUP BEHIND OUR LINE!”

Dumbledore stopped when he heard that. The fighting was still in the distance, but that was Harry's voice! He increased his pace.

Dumbledore walked steadily east, towards the source of that strange hum. He stopped suddenly, nearly causing the two men following him to pile into his back.

Nymphadora Tonks leaned with her back against the wall of Honeydukes. Luna worked on her wound healing it and administer a pain relieving potion.

*Is that Miss Lovegood? Thought Dumbledore. How did she get here? She's supposed to be back at the school!*

Remus, spotting Tonks, rushed to her side. Luna looked up at Remus and smiled reassuringly. Then she turned and rushed back to the fight.

McGonagall, Severus and Dumbledore followed.

They didn't have to go far. Up the road from Honeydukes, Dumbledore once again stopped suddenly, this time in shock. It wasn't possible. There were over fifty students from the school cutting across the road. They were holding against the Death Eaters!

McGonagall's face paled and she gaped at the sight before them. “Oh Merlin Albus, they're students!” she whispered.

He could see a small number of Aurors filling the gaps between each group of students.

“ANTI-PERSONELL FIRE!” yelled Harry Potter.

New spells shot out from the students. Arcing over the first line of Death Eaters, the spells exploded in the air behind them, showering the rear ranks with hundreds of pieces of sharp metal. In a single volley, more than forty death eaters fell.

Dumbledore was at a total loss. He simply didn't know what to do. The students were holding against a much large force and doing major damage.

“SHEILDERS! PREPARE TO ROTATE!” Harry yelled.

Amelia Bones finally arrived in Hogsmeade and she joined Dumbledore, watching the students...students!...doing *their* job.

---

### **Harry and the DA...**

Harry looked at the forward facing shields. The two end squads were all right, but the three center squads were glowing brightly. The center squad had started to shimmer, a sure sign that it was about to overload if they didn't let it bleed off the energy it had absorbed.

“SHEILDERS! PREPARE TO ROTATE!” He yelled.

At their nods of readiness, he gave the order. “SHIELDERS! ROTATE!”

In each squad, the three shielders shifted positions. The front facing shield was moved to the left, where it could safely bleed off energy, as the right shield moved to the front.

“ANTI-PERSONELL FIRE!” Harry ordered.

Again, the high arcing spells shot out from the squads, exploding over the rear ranks of the Death Eaters.

---

### **The Second Wave arrives...**

It took too much time. The second wave was half again as strong as the first, nearly three hundred Death Eaters, the crème of the crop. Lucius Malfoy led the group, Bellatrix Lestrange was second in command.

The Death Eaters boiled out from behind the train station building and paused for a moment. In front of them were the remnants of the first wave, less than one hundred Death Eaters.

“For the Dark Lord!” shouted Malfoy

And the crowd of Death Eaters surged forward.

---

### **Harry and the DA...**

“ANTI-PERSONELL FIRE!” he yelled for the third time that day.

Again the spells shot out to the back of the ranks of the Death Eaters. In an instant some eighty of the tightly packed Death Eaters were dead.

---

### **Lucius Malfoy...**

Malfoy ducked as the spells exploded overhead.

*Great Merlin, what in the hell was that?* He thought. *I better get my ass to the front to see what's going on.*

He didn't want to, but he shoved and pushed his way forward.

---

### **Bellatrix Lestrange...**

Seeing what happened to the rear ranks of her group, she decided to swing south and see if she could come up along the side of that strange cluster of shields.

She moved stealthily around until she had a good position. She saw an Auror firing into her Death Eaters.

She stepped out from behind her cover and cast her spell.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

The Auror, caught off guard, died instantly.

---

### **A time for justice...**

He saw a flash of green out of the corner of his eye. Turning left he saw her.

Bellatrix!

Neville dived to the ground, firing off a cutting hex which narrowly missed Bellatrix.

Spotting Neville, she dove to one side while firing another killing curse at him. Neville rolled out of the way and sprang to his feet.

The two faced each other across six meters of open space.

“Well Longbottom, I think it's time you join your parents in St. Mungos!”

“Crucio!”

The curse hit Neville squarely in the chest.

Bellatrix gaped. Her curse had hit, she saw it hit! He hadn't even tried to dodge it. Yet he was still standing?

"I'll see you in hell first Bella," Neville snarled. "Diffindo!"

The spell caught her in the side. She rolled away gasping in pain and cast another Cruciatus. As he dodged away, she cursed. Her curse turned to a shriek as he struck her with another cutting curse.

Forgoing the Unforgiveables, Bellatrix started using other spells. She knew she was in a fight for her life. She managed to hit Neville in the leg with a cutting hex, and narrowly missed with several Reductos. She tried a smothering hex, but missed as she was forced to dive out of the way of another spell from Neville.

The two continued to trade shots for a minute or so when it happened. Neville slipped, the blood from his wound and run down his leg, causing his foot to slide in his boot. It was a minor slip, but it was enough.

"DIFFINDO!" Bellatrix yelled.

Neville screamed as his wand arm was cut off at the elbow. Reeling, he tried to catch himself as he fell. As the bloody remains of his arm ground into the dirt, he screamed again. Laying on the ground, he panted. His arm pumped blood freely. When a shadow fell over him, he looked up into Belletrix' eyes, gleaming down at him.

"Don't worry little Nevi. You're parents will be joining you soon," she said in a sing-song voice. "When I'm done with you, I'll see to it myself! Enjoy your time in hell!"

Neville raised his hand, as if begging her to stop.

Lifting her wand, she snarled, "AVADA..."

"Reducto!" Neville gasped.

His wandless spell blew right through her stomach and out her back, taking with it a long chunk of spinal column. Her eyes widened in shock and she collapsed backwards, dying.

Neville cast a bandaging charm on the stump of his arm and staggered to his feet. Reeling from loss of blood and shock, he moved back up the line towards Harry.

---

### **Behind the line...**

Slowly, a crowd built up behind the DA, mostly Order members and the few remaining unwounded Aurors. Molly paled when she saw Harry, Ginny and Ron out there. Arthur grabbed her when she tried to run to them. She looked at him, pleadingly.

“No love. They may be our children, but they’re warriors today. Look, they’re doing what we could not do.”

She crumpled in his strong arms, unable to argue with him.

Remus looked at the stunned and immobile onlookers. *Idiots!* He thought fiercely, before shouting, “WELL? Are you warriors of the light or spectators? HELP THEM!”

Order members broke from their paralysis and moved forward to join the Aurors and the DA.

Amelia Bones turned to Dumbledore.

“You did this? You trained these students? No... I can see this is as much a surprise to you as it is to me...”

Dumbledore could barely nod in agreement.

She scowled at him and moved forward to help with the others.

---

### **Lucius Malfoy...**

“Move forward!”

He was in front now, but he continued moving, ducking behind his own shields and everyone else’s. It had been his intent to lead from the rear, but this group of students...STUDENTS!...had forced him from the safety of that position.

---

### **Harry and the DA...**

They were holding, but they wouldn’t hold for long. The numbers were not on their side. There were so many Death Eaters that they were spreading out and starting to flank him on both flanks. Between the remaining Aurors, the DA and the Order, they had barely a hundred and twenty fighters, and were badly outnumbered. Hermione had joined Squad two. One of the students there had gone down from a ricochet that made it through the gap in the shields. Ginny and Luna were helping wounded Aurors and Order members who had taken up positions between the shielded squads.

Three more DA members went down with hits coming in either through the gaps or from overhead. Harry’s eyes narrowed. He knew it was time for drastic measures. Either he’d have to fall back or...



Then he saw him, darting in and out of the shields on the front line of the Death Eaters. There might be a way to pull this off yet!

“MALFOY!” Harry bellowed. It was enough. Malfoy paused to see who had yelled his name.

Harry darted out in front of Squad three. He cast a shield for a moment.

“Accio Malfoy!”

Lucius Malfoy came flying through the air and collided with Harry’s shield, stunning him. Dropping his shield, he crouched down and ran to Malfoy. Upon reaching him he knelt down, ripped open the box, and pulled out the attack crystal. There wasn’t a moment to lose. He rolled sideways, dodging a killing curse. He cast another shield to buy time and prayed that this would work. His glamour dropped as soon as he started to feed energy into the attack crystal.

Ron, at the top of the line, saw Harry out in front and his eyes widened.

“COVERING FIRE!” He yelled.

Again, smoke spells burst in front of the ranks of Death Eaters, but this time it didn’t stop them. They fired at random into the smoke. Spells continued to blast through, but they were un-aimed.

Harry’s shield dropped as soon as he started to power the crystal. He couldn’t do both things at the same time. He never even noticed the hits he took, as he sent all his magic into that crystal. In a matter of seconds, he was hit with multiple cutting hexes and over a dozen crucios. The crystal burned a white hot in his hand. Turning to stunned man, Harry aimed the crystal right at his forehead. An intense white beam shot out, hitting Malfoy. This had to work, the attack crystal was supposed to attack all the dark marks in the area, but it had never been tested.

Malfoy’s eyes snapped open and he began to writhe on the ground, screaming, his body starting to smoke. Barely a second later all of the Death Eaters dropped to the ground in agony. Harry ignored them.

Ron, seeing what was going on, yelled to the DA, “Check Fire! Check Fire!”

Malfoy continued to writhe; Harry stood rock still over the screaming Death Eater as he continued to feed magic into the crystal. The sound of hundreds of people screaming was hideous! The light from the crystal continued to brighten, as did the glow from Harry, until everyone had to turn away from it.

When the light faded, Harry stood swaying. The crystal in his hand smoked from the energy it had been made to carry. Death Eaters were down everywhere. Malfoy had been reduced to a charred skeleton.

Harry toppled over the still smoking remains and lay still in the morning sun.

“HARRY!” screamed Ginny and she pelted out to him.

Ron barked out new commands. “All squads, drop shields. Medic detail, check wounded!”

The silence, which suddenly descended on the battlefield, was eerie. It was possible to hear the occasional moans of wounded, both behind the line and in front.

Then another voice rang out in anguish. "NEVILLE!"

Luna rushed over to the still figure, laying face down in the road. Ron's eye's narrowed. Then he turned to fifth squad's leader. "Susan, send a messenger to the castle. Inform them we have wounded coming in."

Susan nodded to one of her squad who apparated away. Apparently, the anti-apparation wards had come down when the Death Eater who'd cast it fell.

Hermione and Ginny were working on Harry. He was a mess. He had been hit by nearly a dozen Cruciatius curses. Serena's potion had helped, but he would pay for it. He had a hole in his side, dozens of cuts from cutting hexes, and the hand that held the crystal seemed to be severely burned. It took both of them to pry the crystal loose, the skin peeling away with it. Frantically, they worked to stabilize him.

Several minutes later, Ginny leaned back as Hermione nodded to a student, who was standing by with a stretcher ready.

Remus approached Ron. Placing a hand on his shoulder he said, "Your job is finished here. We'll clean up."

Ron nodded and turned back to the DA. "All units form up. Medic detail! Stretcher the wounded. Prepared to return to the school!"

As the squads formed up into neat columns, Ron looked over the field. Six DA members had been injured. Harry and Neville were the most serious, but four more had minor to moderate wounds.

As Amelia Bones and Dumbledore moved towards the neat group of students, Ron gave an order and, as one, they apparated away, stretchers and all. Amelia was astounded. She was certain that she had spotted her niece Susan among these students. Her niece had NEVER mentioned anything like this in any of her letters!

She was about to turn to Dumbledore and rip into him when she was interrupted by Severus Snape.

"Headmaster, Director Bones, I have made a preliminary survey of the Death Eaters before us. I would have to estimate that Harry and his group have decimated Voldemort's forces. There are at least four hundred, maybe five hundred Death Eaters out there.

"You knew about this group of his, Severus?"

"Yes Sir, I did. Harry's been training them for this battle since the beginning of the school term."

"Why didn't you come to me with this Severus? Why didn't you tell me?"

“I’m sorry Headmaster. The simple fact is, Harry doubts your commitment to our cause, and he felt you would have tried to stop him from fighting here today if you knew about it. Had you succeeded in stopping him, we would have lost this battle. He did what was necessary Headmaster and, in doing so, has introduced a whole new way of fighting this war. He knows his responsibility Sir, but he also refuses to be a pawn any longer. If you want to deal with Harry, you need to treat him as an equal, not a student.

“I have to tell you Headmaster that Harry is the only member of his group that will speak to you about this. He has given specific orders that no one else talk about their activities. I think you will find the DA exceedingly loyal to him. Just look at what they accomplished here today.”

As Snape spoke, Amelia Bones listened carefully. She was enjoying this. Dumbledore had been a thorn in her side for years with his Order, and now a student, A STUDENT, builds an army right under his nose!

Senior Auror Shacklebolt came up and slipped her a piece of parchment, interrupting her reverie. It was the casualty count and it wasn’t good.

Effective: 35 Aurors  
Wounded: 47 Aurors  
Killed: 68 Aurors

She scowled. Just under half of her Auror force was dead, and many of the wounded would be out of action for months to come.

Dumbledore stood there, digesting what Severus had said. *Yes, I can see the only way I can deal with Harry anymore will be as an equal. I have robbed him of his childhood, and this war has forced him to grow up far faster than I would have wished,* he thought sadly.

Director Bones broke his concentration. “I too, want to talk to Mr. Potter. What he accomplished here is nothing short of amazing. And given our loses, I think I would like to talk to him about getting help recovering from them. If he can build group of students into that kind of fighting force, and do it under your own nose Dumbledore, he’d build a force to be reckoned with if we allowed him!”

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### **Hogwarts, School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

Professor Sprout had finally collapsed in a chair at the head table, staring at the tall Slytherin. No matter how many house points she threatened to take away from him, he refused...*refused*...to drop the shields now guarding the castle and the Great Hall.

She watched Blaise as he walked away, circling the Great Hall, talking to students, checking with his shielders and generally keeping everyone calm. When the castle rang out in a loud two-tone gong, Blaise look up sharply.

“Shielders drop shields. Prepare to receive incoming wounded!” He ordered.

Serena Snape went over to Madam Pomfrey. "Poppy, come, we will be needed in the infirmary shortly."

"But how can... how... Serena?" She said weakly.

"Poppy, we have injured coming in. I don't know how many, but the shields have been dropped. That noise was the signal that Harry and his friends have succeeded and are returning to the school with injured. The battle is over."

"Mr. Potter eh? Mark my words! He'll probably be one of those injured if I know that boy! Very well Serena, let's go wait for the injured in the infirmary."

Serena and Poppy arrived at the infirmary and were laying out supplies when the doors burst open, and six stretchers were brought in. Ron posted two members at the door to the infirmary and told everyone else to stand down. Several of the medical detail entered and started working on the lesser wounded.

Poppy stood in shock as she watched students healing wounds, or requesting potions from Serena, to administer to their patients. She noted that Harry, and Mr. Longbottom were among the wounded.

Luna healed a bad cut on Neville's leg, and then looked up at Poppy. "Madam Pomfrey, he'll need a Crucio restorative and two Blood Replenishers before we can re-grow his arm."

Poppy arched her eyebrow in surprise. She ran a diagnostic scan, which confirmed Luna's suggestions.

"Hmmm... Very well, Miss Lovegood. We'll do it that way. I'll get you the potions, and then we'll work on starting the re-growth." As too few of the students went into medicine, she wasn't about to discourage any student that showed an aptitude for it.

Turning to Potter, she saw that most of his wounds had been healed already. He was awake, if very groggy, and Ginny Weasley was helping him drink a Crucio restorative potion. She saw his hand and frowned. Even in the magic world, burns were tricky. She hurried to her supply cabinet and pulled out a large tub of salve and bandages. Returning to him, she handed the salve to Ginny along with the bandages.

"That's a very bad burn he has. You'll need to numb it first, and then smear this cream on it, before bandaging it. He'll need to have the bandages changed and the salve put on three times a day. It's going to hurt a lot for the next few days before the healing reaches his nerves. He can either use a numbing charm or a Pain Relief potion. The problem with a numbing charm is that, with the hand numb, he might bang it against something and damage it without ever knowing about it."

Ginny glanced at Harry then suggested, "I think a Pain Relief potion would be best then." She turned back to Harry's hand and started working again.

"Well Mr. Potter, I suspected you would be one of those carried in. I just never expected you to bring your own healers with you!"

Harry gave her a tired smile. "We'll always need you Madam Pomfrey. It just wouldn't be Hogwarts without you."

One by one, Poppy checked on her charges and released them. There was really very little for her to do.

Reluctantly, she released Harry. He was exhausted and weak from multiple Cruciatus hits, but she also knew Miss Weasley would make sure he rested, as well as seeing to his hand.

With Ginny and Serena watching him carefully, Harry left the infirmary. The only member of the DA that would require a longer stay was Neville and he seemed to have a very dedicated healer in Miss Lovegood.

Just outside the infirmary, the three met up with Professor McGonagall.

"Mr. Potter, the Headmaster would like to speak with you in the Great Hall, and from what I understand, so would a great many other people." Her displeasure was evident in her voice.

"Yes Professor, we'll be right along."

"I'll see that he gets there, Minerva," said Serena.

McGonagall turned, her back stiff, and left the three to make their own way to the Great Hall.

Halfway there, Harry gasped and staggered. Ginny and Serena caught him.

"Harry, what is it?"

"I need... to sit... for a moment..." he gasped. Ginny nearly let go of him as she could feel his muscles rippling under her fingers.

They helped him to an empty classroom and he sat down, his body trembling. His breath ragged from the pain. Serena knelt by his side. "Harry, what's wrong?"

"I... think... my body is building that spillway you talked about Professor... all by itself..."

Ginny pulled open the front of his robe and opened his shirt. She gasped as his skin tone slowly darkened and, she wasn't sure, but it seemed like his muscle definition had improved. They weren't bulging; it just seemed they had a sharper definition. She looked up at Harry, the light returning to his eyes.

"You like Miss Weasley?" he asked, trying to smirk through the pain

Serena tried to hide her laugh and failed.

Dumbly, she nodded, and tried hard not to lick her lips. After a moment, the pain passed and Harry had a deep bronze tone to his skin. Ginny reluctantly re-buttoned his shirt and they continued down to the Great Hall.

### **Somewhere in England, location unknown...**

Peter Pettigrew was terrified, even more so than usual. He cowered outside the Master's chamber where, a short time before, a terrible screaming had come.

Now there was silence. He had sent a messenger to Hogsmeade and when the messenger returned with the news, he was too afraid to deliver it. So he sent the messenger into the chamber.

Voldemort was in a rage. He didn't bother casting the killing curse on the messenger. He snapped the man's neck with his hands.

His arm burned painfully, and his link to his forces confirmed what the messenger had told him. His forces had been defeated, most of them killed.

He didn't know how, he didn't know who, but he was determined to find out.

"Wormtail! Stop cowering outside the door and get in here!"

Wormtail scurried into the room.

"I have several tasks for you Wormtail..." he said with a hiss.

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### **The Great Hall, Hogwarts...**

They arrived at the Great Hall to find that the DA members were being denied entry by Aurors. Apparently, they wanted to speak to Harry alone.

Senior Auror Shacklebolt stepped into the doorway. "I'm sorry Potter; they want to talk to you alone. No one else is allowed in."

Harry felt a cold determination fill his belly and the light in his eyes flared. He turned his gaze on Shacklebolt. "Senior Auror, I will say this only once. We will all be entering the Hall. If you try to prevent it, you'll regret it."

Shacklebolt suddenly looked doubtful. This was no student he was dealing with, this was a wizard, and one more powerful than himself.

Harry went on in a gentler voice. "Senior Auror what few comrades you have left are alive because of us. Honor them and do not make us regret saving your lives."

Shacklebolt nodded shakily and motioned to his Aurors to let them all in.

Dumbledore looked furiously at Shacklebolt. Arrayed with Dumbledore were all of the teachers, Amelia Bones, a number of Aurors and Order members, including a very relieved Arthur and Molly Weasley and Remus Lupin, who winked at Harry and raised an eyebrow at his tan.

Dumbledore stood, preparing to speak, but Harry stopped him with a raised hand. He began to speak softly, his tone all the more authoritative because of it.

“Before you begin Headmaster, know that should you try to invoke any disciplinary action against us, we are fully prepared to leave Hogwarts and attend school elsewhere. Remus has handled all the details for me. I have only to say the word and our new school will be operational and accredited by tomorrow. I might add that, if we leave, Hogwarts will be without Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts Professors.”

Dumbledore turned to glare furiously at Severus and Serena. Both gazed back at him, calmly. Sitting heavily, he turned back to Harry as the young man spoke.

“Now Headmaster, are you ready to listen to me?”

Dumbledore nodded mutely. Some of the other teachers looked at Harry like he was some strange bug. This wasn't the meek, shy Harry Potter they knew.

“Since the end of my fourth year you, the Order and the Ministry have stumbled about allowing Voldemort to recruit his forces...”

A bunch of people flinched at the name.

“Look at you! How can you possibly fight him when you are afraid of even saying his name?” He asked them in disgust. Raking fingers through his hair, he said, “Had I listened to you Headmaster, I would have lost everything I hold dear. You tried to take me away from my family, you threatened to expel the woman I love from this school, just so you could control my life.”

Molly and Arthur looked startled at that and shot Dumbledore angry looks.

“Last summer I got an idea which stands before you today. Wizards and Witches, trained in the muggle way of fighting and healing, motivated, highly skilled, utilizing spells and techniques which no one else knows. Had we not intervened today, the casualty count would have been far greater than it is. And Hogsmeade would be a burning ruin.

“You know this Sir, because I showed you the vision months ago of what it could have been. This was not the final battle to be sure. We have badly beaten Voldemort in the field and he will be a long time recovering, but the final battle is less than a year away and it will occur right here on the grounds of this school!”

Dumbledore jerked his head up to stare at Harry. Everyone else in the hall gasped.

“The choice is yours headmaster in how you deal with us. Are you willing to commit to war or are you planning to continue to waffle and cling to noble ideals? There is nothing noble about war, nothing fun, and nothing glorious. It's brutal, ugly and downright vicious. One way or the other Albus, this is my war and I intend to fight it on my terms. Will you help me as a friend and equal or not?”

Dumbledore didn't look surprised at Harry's use of his first name, but he did look amused.

“Harry, I would be proud to help you. That's what I've wanted from the beginning. I know now that I went about it the wrong way, however. What do you need?”

Harry looked relieved and asked softly, “Albus, I would ask that you cancel and reschedule today’s OWLS and NEWT’s for Monday. I do not want anyone to miss chances of obtaining good grades because of what happened today. The rest of our needs and discussions about the defense of Hogwarts can happen another time.”

Dumbledore eyes twinkled and he said, “I had already ordered just that, Harry.”

From behind Harry came many sighs of relief.

Harry nodded at the Headmaster and smiled slightly. Then he turned to look questioningly at Amelia Bones, as she looked to be nearly bursting to speak. She stepped forward a pace or two, her eyes shining with pride as she took in the sight of her niece, Susan Bones, standing proudly with her friends, her comrades.

“Mr. Potter...”

“Please Director Bones, just Harry is fine.”

“Very well, Harry. I’d like to say thank you, on behalf of the Aurors. You and your companions did what we could not. You saved hundreds of lives today and I’m personally going to recommend the Order of Merlin for the lot of you. I would like very much to talk to you about your training techniques and methods. It takes us three years to train an Auror and what you did in less than a full year is... incredible!”

“I can’t really take the credit for it Director, I had exceptional people. But I would be honored to talk to you about our training methods Director. However right now I’m sure you’d like to speak with your niece. I know she’s dying to talk to you,” he said with a grin.

With a glance up to the Headmaster, he nodded, and everyone relaxed. Dumbledore sat for a moment then filled several tables with food. Other students started streaming in to the Great Hall, they wanted the story as well.

As Ginny, Ron and Hermione moved off to talk to Molly and Arthur, Harry remained where he was. He was dreading that meeting more than any other. Their approval of him was one of the lynchpins of his existence, like his love for Ginny. He was afraid to lose that. When a hand fell on his shoulder, he turned quickly to find Remus smiling at him.

The man grabbed Harry in a bone crushing hug. “Thank you for what you did for Tonks! She’s going to be fine.”

“I’m glad Remus, she’s important to you, and to me. I’d really hate to see anything happen to my Auntie,” he said with a smirk.

He glanced longingly over at Molly and Arthur, who were busy hugging Ginny and Hermione.

“Harry? What is it?” Remus asked.

“Do you think they’ll hate me now Remus? I took their two youngest children into danger. I’m almost afraid to face them,” he said in a small voice.



Remus looked at him sharply. He could tell that the scars left by the Dursleys had only begun to heal.

“Harry, they won’t hate you. They love you like a son. Come on, I’ll walk over with you.”

Reluctantly, Harry let Remus lead him over to Molly and Arthur. Molly grabbed him and looked him over carefully. Spotting the bandage covered hand; she started to cry and pulled him into a fierce embrace. “Harry! I was so worried when we saw you three out there! I’m so glad you’re all safe!”

“Molly, Arthur, I’m sorry that I took Ron and Ginny into danger...”

Arthur interrupted him. “Harry, I think I know my own children well enough to know that Ron wouldn’t have been able to live with himself if he let you go alone. And Ginny? Well, she’s merely protecting her investment,” he said with a smile. “Although I do wish you were more like a normal teenager and just got my daughter pregnant instead of dragging her off into battle. But...”

“ARTHUR!” Molly exclaimed, her face beet red. She smacked him across the back of his head.

Stammering, he said hastily, “Umm... forget I said that last part.”

“You’re not mad at me?” Harry asked.

Molly took him by the shoulders. “Harry, Arthur and I know what you have to do in this war. We really wish you didn’t have to do it, just like we wish our children didn’t have to get involved, but we’re not mad at any of you. You’ve done us all proud today.”

Hermione cut in. “Harry, when did you get that tan? It looks good on you!”

Somehow Harry felt he was going to be asked that question a lot in the days to come.

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**The next morning...**

### *MASSIVE BLOW DEALT TO YOU-KNOW-WHO’S FORCES*

*By Rita Skeeter*

*Director Amelia Bones reported today the death of over five hundred Death Eaters in an attack on Hogsmeade. Casualties were far lighter than they could have been, and the prophet has learned that all this was made possible by the Boy-Who-Lived! Yes that’s right! The Boy-Who-Lived has come out of Hogwarts and struck a major blow against You-know-who! Unfortunately, we were unable to determine exactly what happened, but it seems the Boy-Who-Lived, with help of some small number of students from his school, dealt this massive blow to the dark forces.*

*Ministry officials confirm that the Minister of Magic himself will be attending a special awards ceremony in Hogsmeade to present multiple Orders of Merlin to the participants of this battle.*

*We have also learned that the Boy-Who-Lived is engaged to be married...*

Harry sighed and put the paper down on the table.

“Well, at least they didn’t release too much information I guess.”

Yesterday, Harry had grabbed a few quick sandwiches from one of the tables and went up to his dorm to sleep. He’d slept through dinner and didn’t wake up until early dawn. It was then that he discovered that trying to do things one handed was extremely difficult. It took him a half hour to get undressed so he could take a shower, and nearly an hour after the shower to get dressed. Some things, like tying his shoes, were impossible for him.

Ron had told him that more than one hundred upper level students had asked about the possibility of joining what was quickly becoming called Potter’s Companions. Even some of the younger students were asking how they could help.

He had visited Neville earlier. His own private healer told him he was doing fine and would be released in two days. She also told him that Neville’s wand had been found in Hogsmeade and returned to him.

Dumbledore had rightly figured that a lot of the DA students would be starving that morning, so he ordered a higher protein fare than usual. Ron watched with amusement as Harry struggled with a plate of steak and eggs. He didn’t have any problems with the eggs, but the steak was trouble.

Hermione and Ginny watched him with disapproving looks. They were waiting for him to ask for help. Harry tried holding the fork in his burned hand but it was too painful. When his hand slipped for the third time, his steak flew across his plate, landing on Ron’s.

Harry looked mournfully at the steak for a moment.

Ron grinned. “Thanks mate!”

Harry growled and stabbed another steak from the platter. He looked at the knife and fork angrily and said, “Oh, bugger this!”

Raising his good hand over the steak he murmured, “Diffindo”, deftly slicing through the steak. And the plate. And the table.

Ron gawked at the wreckage for a moment, and then started howling in laughter. Harry just stared at his plate. He could see his foot shuffle nervously through the hole in the table. Damn, his shoes were still untied!

“Oh honestly Harry! It wouldn’t hurt you to ask for help would it?” Ginny exclaimed as Hermione whipped out her wand and repaired the damage.

Ginny reached for his plate and cut his steak into manageable pieces, all the while complaining about his stubborn nature.

“It’s not stubbornness Gin. I’m trying to adapt. I have to live with this for at least a week. Have you any idea what you do during a day that takes both hands? It took me over an hour to get dressed today and I wasn’t even able to tie my own shoes!” He protested weakly.

“Tomorrow is that stupid ceremony and I have no clue how I’m going to get into my dress robes. I’m beginning to think I just may end up transfiguring what I’m wearing for the next week.”

“Don’t worry Harry. If necessary, I’ll help you get dressed,” she said, patting his cheek fondly. Harry turned red at that.

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### **So long and thanks for all the Fudge...**

Harry felt decidedly uncomfortable. He and the DA, minus Neville who was still in the infirmary, were sitting up in front of a large crowd. The place was crawling with reporters. Up on a stage were a number of chairs for important people, who were probably going to inflict long and boring speeches on everyone.

Harry started to tune people out after a while. It wasn’t until Ginny nudged him and whispered for him to stay awake that he realized he had started dozing. He turned his attention to the current speaker.

“... and so, with a great deal of pride, I am pleased to give you our illustrious Minister of Magic. Ladies and Gentlemen, the honorable Cornelius Fudge!”

There was a moment of bored applause and Minister Fudge bounced up to the podium to speak.

“Nearly seventeen years ago, I took it upon myself to see to the nurturing of a recently orphaned child. He was placed in a fine home, where he was cared for and loved, for the first ten years of his life. I was so proud of our Harry when he turned eleven years old and entered Hogwarts.

“I watched his academic career with great joy, occasionally giving it a nudge where I could. I knew the world expected great things of Harry Potter and I loved him like he was my own son.”

Ginny looked over at Harry and then nudged Ron.

Ron looked at Ginny and Harry, and then nudged Hermione.

When Hermione looked at Harry, she barely stifled a groan.

He sat stiffly, his eyes like twin search lights. Harry Potter was pissed and he was going let the public know about it.

“I know how supportive he has been of my policies and how much he hopes to see me remain as Minister for a long time to come. Therefore, it is with no small sense of satisfaction that I am here today to honor him by awarding him the Order of Merlin, First Class. Come on up here Harry and say hi to everyone!”

Harry assumed a smile and bounded up the stairs of the stage. Minister Fudge shook his hand, pausing for several photos to be taken, and then stepped aside to let the boy speak.

The Minister wasn’t worried. All had been taken care of. There was no way he’d allow this *boy* to ruin his career. The podium was surrounded by a silencing charm. A member of his staff would

read a prepared speech which, thanks to the charmed microphone, would be delivered in Potter's voice.

Harry detected the charms and nearly smiled. Fudge was in for a bad day. Quickly sending a surge of magic down the charmed link, he stunned the Minister's lackey. Releasing the silencing charm on the podium, he smiled at the crowd.

"Thank you Minister Fudge, ladies and gentlemen, representatives of the press... This is quite an honor you are bestowing on me. Unfortunately, I cannot accept this award..."

Fudge had a look of panic on his face. This wasn't the speech he had prepared!

"You see ladies and gentlemen, the real Harry Potter grew up living with muggles who beat him severely, nearly killing him on more than one occasion. They taught him little of their world and nothing of this one. Where was the good Minister? I don't know I never met him until my third year at Hogwarts.

"In the summer of my fifth year, he tried to have me expelled from school for the crime of defending myself against two Dementors, sent to kill me by Delores Umbridge, his aid. In the fifth year, he orchestrated a slander campaign against me and my Headmaster, because we tried to tell people that Voldemort had returned. He allowed Umbridge to torture me and my fellow students, and set other students spying on us. For more than a year, he knew about Voldemort's return and he did nothing, except attack me and make my life miserable.

"This year, he threatened to take me away from my family, from the people who love me, and train me as an assassin. Now he stands before you spouting his lies, while he did nothing. Our Auror force was way too small. Everyone knows it, but he refused to do anything about it. He put you, ladies and gentlemen, at risk. He put you and your loved ones in danger by his inaction.

"So you see, I'm not the Harry Potter that he claims I am. Therefore, I am not entitled to this award. It wouldn't be right. It belongs to a fantasy Harry Potter, who does not exist.

Now I believe the press has a few questions?"

"Mr. Potter, Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet. Are you calling our Minister of Magic incompetent?"

"No Rita, he's not good enough to be called incompetent. He might have been all right during the peace that existed before Voldemort's return. But we're at war now, and the Minister is incapable of handling what needs to be done. His policies against other magical creatures are only helping Voldemort."

"A follow up question please, Mr. Potter!"

Harry nodded to Rita.

"Are you saying we should replace Minister Fudge? Or call for a vote of no confidence? And if so, whom would you suggest to replace him?"

“Rita, I’ve thought a vote of no confidence was appropriate more than a year ago. As to who would replace him? I’d suggest looking seriously at Amelia Bones. She is honest, competent and fair. I think she understands what needs to be done in this war and would treat the other magical races fairly.”

As Rita opened her mouth to shout another question, he raised his hand. “No more questions, please.”

Harry walked off the stage, leaving the award lying on the podium. The crowd was in an uproar. All of Fudge’s toadies on the stage were in a state of shock. Amelia Bones looked stunned. The DA members were on their feet, applauding.

Harry walked over to Ginny, Ron and Hermione and asked, “I don’t understand why Fudge didn’t stop me from saying all that?”

Ron looked sheepish. “Well, I sort of hit him with a full body bind.”

Ginny looked at Ron in shock and said, “You did? So did I!”

“Make that three,” Hermione added softly, looking embarrassed.

Harry doubled up in laughter.

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## Epilogue.

### **Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry, breakfast in the Great Hall...**

Harry and Ginny arrived late to the Great Hall. She had taken the time to replace the salve and bandage on his hand, and then helped him with his shoelaces, much to Harry’s embarrassment.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like her taking care of him, but tying his shoes? That made him feel like a three year old all over again.

It had been two days since his speech in Hogsmeade and to be honest, the sensation it had caused was more than a bit overwhelming for him. He really wished he could just run away and hide from it all.

Yesterday the fifth years had finished their OWLS, much to the relief of the entire school. Harry was especially relieved, as Ginny seemed much more relaxed now that her OWLS were behind her. Most of the classes had ended at this point. The students would leave the school in a little over a week. The school remained open during this time as students completed long term projects and handed them in. For Harry and Ginny, this was like one long relaxing weekend. Hermione, on the other hand, had volunteered for several projects besides the ones she was working for Harry and the Order.

The couple paused as they entered the Great Hall. The room was silent. Everyone was looking at them. Hermione and Ron rushed up to the couple and shoved a newspaper at them.

*Potter topples Fudge Government!*  
*By Rita Skeeter*

*In a late night session of the Wizengamot, a vote of no confidence was successfully held, removing Cornelius Fudge from office. The Wizengamot elected Amelia Bones, formerly Director of Magical Law Enforcement as the new Minister of Magic. Ms Bones, a former Senior Auror herself, appointed Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt to head up the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She also appointed Arthur Weasley, formerly manager of the Department of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, to the post of Deputy Minister in charge of Muggle Relations and Relations to Magical Creatures.*

*Minister Bones promised swift action in rebuilding the Auror forces and spoke of initiating sweeping reforms, overturning years of rules and regulations put in place by the former administration.*

*The call for a vote of no confidence came as a result of a public speech given by the Boy-Who-Lived in Hogsmeade following the terrible battle, which ensued there. The Boy-Who-Lived, it is rumored, played a pivotal role in that battle, and later on in his speech, revealing former Minister of Magic Fudge's mistakes...*

*For a complete Bio on the Boy-Who-Lived, see page 2.*  
*Full text of the Boy-Who-Lived's Hogsmeade Speech, page 2.*  
*The Boy-Who-Lived Engaged, complete story, page 3.*  
*Stories from friends and former lovers of the Boy-Who-Lived, page 3*

Harry gasped seeing that last one. Why didn't they just dissect him here and now? He peered up from the paper and looked about the hall. Everyone was still staring at him, although there did seem to be a fair amount of envious looks being cast at Ginny.

Ginny laughed at Harry's reaction, and linked her arm with his. As they moved to their seats, Blaise stood up raising his cup in salute to Harry. Then the rest of the Slytherin squad stood, copying his gesture. Then it was the DA. By the time they got to their spot at the table, nearly everyone was standing, even the teachers.

Harry was blushing furiously, but thanks to his new tan, only a few people could tell. The tell tale sign was rather subtle, the tips of his ears got darker, much darker. He wanted to climb under the table and pull it in behind him.

After everyone finally sat down, Dumbledore remained standing. He looked to the Gryffindor table for a long moment before he began to speak.

"Harry, I will be brief since I know how much you hate this attention. I know you hate being called the Boy-Who-Lived, or being called a hero. But I would like to ponder this. The true measure of a hero lies not within the deeds he performs, but rather in what he gives to people. You give people hope for a future. I pray you will think long and hard on that in the time to come. Now everyone, tuck in."

Ginny watched Harry stare down at his plate, burning with embarrassment and then she snorted. "Yeah, some hero can't even tie his own shoes!"

He stared at her incredulously until he noticed the shine to her eyes. She was once again grounding him by poking him when he needed it most. He hugged her and started to laugh. She more than anyone else understood him best. But wasn't that the way it was supposed to be?

Harry looked with longing at the thick slices of ham that filled the platter in front of him. He still couldn't hold both a knife and a fork, and Madam Pomfrey told him just yesterday that his hand would probably take another three weeks before the sensitivity fully faded. She mentioned something about damaged nerves and how it took longer to repair them than it did skin.

"Gin? Would you?" He looked at the ham slices again. She smiled up at him sweetly and speared a slice to put on his plate.

"Thanks!"

"Look at it this way mate, at least she isn't hand feeding you! OW!" Ron turned to Hermione, glaring at her.

"What did you kick me for? That bloody well hurt!"

Harry and Ginny snickered at the both of them.

Hermione read to them all from the articles as they ate. Harry was upset when they identified Ginny in the article again, but couldn't fault their calling her a "Ravishing Red Head" with a feisty temper. After all, she did have a temper, and she was a red head, and ravishing was only the least of the accolades he'd be willing to agree to. Then Hermione switched to the next article.

"In talking with the Mr. Potter's classmates, it was revealed to us that during his fifth year, he had an entirely different love interest. A Miss Cho Chang, a member of the house of Ravenclaw and like Harry, the seeker for that team. Miss Chang is a year older than Mr. Potter. It is said they dated extensively during his fifth year, and according to some, even planned to marry until this new love interest came into his life. Miss Chang is quoted as saying 'I am so much better for Harry than that Weasley girl! She's from a poor family! All she wants is his money! What can she offer him? Besides, I know for a fact he won't be going to his marriage bed inexperienced'..." Hermione trailed off and looked up at Harry.

Harry sat there stiffly, his one good hand balled up into a fist, the fire behind his eyes blazing. Ginny looked totally aghast and ready to cry. Harry glanced down at Ginny and he felt his anger drain from him. This was going to take more drastic action than just peeling Cho out of her skin with a dull knife.

He stood and looked down at Ginny. She smiled weakly at him and he offered her his hand. She looked confused, but took it and stood up. He led her up to the front of the hall and stood there, holding Ginny with one arm. She had buried her face into his shoulder. Slowly the hall grew silent as heads turned to look at the couple.

He spotted Chang, sitting at the Ravenclaw table. Levitating her to stand on top of it, he then he cast a truth charm on her.

As she looked around fearfully, Harry spoke in a soft voice that somehow reached to every corner of the Great Hall.

“Miss Chang, I warned you once before about saying anything bad about my family or Ginny. Why did you lie to the paper?”

“I wanted to get you back for refusing to go out with me.”

“So you admit what you told the Daily Prophet was a lie?”

“Yes. I was hurt. I did everything to try to seduce you and you still rejected me! You wouldn’t even touch me!”

“You will retract the statements you made,” Harry said. It wasn’t a request.

She looked back at him defiantly. “Or what?” She snapped.

He released her from his truth charm and asked, “Have you ever heard of Pinocchio, Cho?”

The muggle-borns in the hall started to grin. Hermione’s eyes lit up devilishly. Normally she wouldn’t condone such a thing, but this was too perfect!

When she scowled at him and refused to answer, he shrugged and continued. “You’re about to become intimately acquainted with the story.”

And with that, he raised his hand and murmured softly under his breath. Cho was incased in a soft, eerie green light and she gasped. When the light faded, Cho Chang stood amid the snickering, laughing, cackling students, horror stricken and groping her new, not really improved, seven-inch nose.

“Harry...” Cho whispered.

“It will grow two inches every day, until you retract your statements to the Daily Prophet.” Harry said. “You’ve lied about me and mine for the last time. After your retraction, the charm will be suspended and your nose will return to normal.”

As Cho started to sob and tried to cover her new growth, Harry continued in a hard, relentless tone.

“However, if you *ever* lie about me, the Weasley’s or any of my friends again, it will return. Aim your spite elsewhere, or pay for it. This is the last warning I’ll give you.”

As the laughter in the hall increased, Cho looked around wildly. Seeing only mocking, laughing faces, she jumped from the table and fled the hall, sobbing.

Harry and Ginny continued to stand there until the sound died out again in the Great Hall.



“You can say what you want about me. But I warn everyone here and now, speak ill of my family, or of my Ginny and I will come for you. I see no shame in calling myself a Weasley. Or in loving one. It’s a proud family with a long history and I’m glad to be part of that!”

At that point he led Ginny back to their seats. She had calmed down while they stood up in front of the Hall, but now that she was seated she seemed to be fuming about something.

He was about to take another bite of his breakfast when there came a sharp pain as his earlobe was pulled hard, and of course, he had no choice but to follow it.

“‘My Ginny’ Mr. Potter? Am I some sort of property now, to be traded or bought?” She hissed, her own eyes flashing.

“Um... what I meant Gin... you see...” He started stammering. Everyone at the Gryffindor table was watching with glee as Harry squirmed under her gaze.

But Ginny was just winding up. Her arms started waving as she told him exactly what she thought of his comments. As Ginny reached her crescendo, he decided to throw caution to the wind. He grabbed her by the shoulders, ignoring the flair of pain in his hand, pulled her close and kissed her. She pounded her fists against his back, but slowly even that stopped, and she then ran a hand through his hair returning the kiss.

He whispered in her ear, “Gin, we belong to each other. That’s what I meant.”

The looked up to the sounds of catcalls and howls from the Gryffindor table and most of the other tables as well.

“I wonder if that will work with ‘Mione?” Ron said foolishly. “OW! Bloody hell woman! Why did you stomp on my foot?” He exclaimed staring at Hermione.

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### **Meeting with the Headmaster...**

After breakfast the four of them went up to Dumbledore’s office. Harry had requested a brief meeting with the headmaster and wanted them all present.

As the group filed into the Headmaster’s office, Dumbledore sat at his customary position watching them all. He didn’t know what the purpose of this meeting was for, and to say he was curious would be an understatement.

“Harry, you asked for this meeting, therefore I suggest you start first.” Dumbledore said kindly. In the past few days, their relationship had been repaired, something for which he was very grateful.

“Sir, is your Pensieve empty at the moment?”

Startled by this strange question, Dumbledore nodded and pulled it out of a drawer in his desk.

Harry got up from his chair and walked over to the Pensieve. He pulled his wand out of a pocket. He felt it very awkward using the wand in the wrong hand, but he finally managed to get a copy of the memory into the Pensieve. He then cast a charm over the Pensieve to preserve the memory for later use.

Turning to his friends, he spoke to them in a low soft tone. "You guys are family to me, and I have shared everything with you, but I'm asking you to please understand me when I say I do not want to you see this memory. Please I beg you. Never ask to see it, never ask me about it."

Turning back to Dumbledore he continued. "Sir, this is the vision which I have not shared with you as yet. Only myself and two others have seen this. And after Professor Snape and his wife helped me with this vision, I willingly allowed Professor Snape to obliviate parts of my memory."

Dumbledore looked thunderstruck. *What was in this vision that was so bad for Harry that he'd willingly undergo an obliviate?*

He returned his attention to Harry.

"The Snapes and I went into this vision, as you will undoubtedly do. We were able to ascertain a time frame for the vision to be between April 7th and April 15th of next year, here at Hogwarts. I will not willingly re-enter this vision Sir, so please do not ask it of me. If you feel it necessary, I will not mind if you share it with others, including Minister Bones. But I would suggest that she be the only one from the Ministry to see it. I wouldn't show it to too many or some who see it may lose hope. Finally, I'll remind you this is only a vision of what will happen *if* I fail in my task."

"Harry? Is it really that bad," Ginny asked softly.

Harry looked at her, and his memory of his desperate need to make sure she was ok that night shuddered through him. He looked at her with a haunted, pained look. "You have no idea Gin and I pray you never do."

She reached up a hand and pulled him down to sit next to her, wrapping her arms around him while he fought the echo of that memory.

Dumbledore watched the young couple and reflected on how differently things might have turned out if Harry hadn't put his foot down back at the beginning of the semester. *Miss Weasley's role in all this becomes more important with each passing day. He thought. Harry has a tenuous grip on his humanity and it's through the love of his family and Miss Weasley most of all that he is able to maintain that.*

"Harry..." Dumbledore began gently, "I promise you I will be most circumspect with whom I show this memory."

"Thank you Sir. That's all I really had to say today. I just wanted everyone here to know how important it was, and why I wouldn't let them see the vision."

"Well then Harry, I have two things to discuss with you. Both come from Minister Bones and need your attention. First, she instructed me to say that, and mine you, this is a direct quote, 'a

good leader takes care of their people and rewards them on occasion'. Therefore, she directs me to give you this."

Dumbledore pulled pushed a rather large box forward. "These Harry, are Order of Merlin Awards. The Minister expects you, as the leader of your group, to hand them out to your companions. In the box you will find First Class awards for yourself, Mr. and Miss Weasley, Misses Granger and Lovegood, and Mr. Longbottom. The others are Second Class awards for all the rest of your companions. I further understand that the Professor's Snape will both be receiving awards for their groundbreaking work on the Anti-Cruciatius potion.

"Minister Bones knows how you dislike the attention Harry, but she reminds you that you have a duty as a commander to perform."

"Yes Sir. I don't want the award, but I guess I can't keep fighting the government either. I'll see they get handed out."

"Good. Now, second, Minister Bones has been extremely impressed with what you have done. As you know, her niece, Susan, lives with her since the girl's parents passed away in the last war. Susan has talked extensively over the past few days with her Aunt. Minister Bone has directed me to tell you that every one of your companions, as well as yourself, will be granted a special permit, allowing you to perform magic this summer. She also says the first piece of legislation she intends to introduce will be to lower the underage magic limit to fourteen. If the legislation passes, she would like you to witness her signing that bill into law."

"I'd be honored Sir. It sounds like Minister Bones is going to do a great job if you ask me."

"I agree. Although she and I don't see eye to eye on everything, I feel she will be most effective in her new post."

As they turned to leave, Harry remembered the box.

"Um... Ron, can you grab the box? I'm still short a hand."

"No worries mate. It's better than cutting your food or tying your shoes," he said with a chuckle.

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### **Dumbledore's Office...**

Albus Dumbledore sat back heavily in his chair, his heart aching. Fawkes from his perch sang a soothing song to him.

"Yes Fawkes, it seems our Harry does carry an unfair burden if this vision is just part of what he's had to deal with."

Dumbledore had just finished reviewing the vision Harry had left him in the Pensieve and he came to the unmistakable conclusion that Harry had been right in having Severus obliviate his memory. He only wished he could be afforded the same luxury.

The images he had witnessed in Harry's vision pressed down hard on him. His school! The finest school in the world, the pride of the English Wizarding world. So much death and destruction.

There has to be a way of helping Harry. He has shown enormous power in this past year and dedication to the cause. But did he have enough power to kill Voldemort? For that matter, how could you kill someone that was nearly immortal?

Now that was something to think about. *Voldemort returned possessing Professor Quirrel in Harry's first year, then again as a specter of his younger self in Harry's second year. Then achieved corporeal form in his fourth year. Would that mean that, even if his body is killed, he might still possess the ability to capture another body?*

Dumbledore smiled briefly when he considered Harry's second year. *The signs were already in place, but Harry was too young and immature to see them. And I was too wrapped up in my own arrogance, that I had forgotten what its like to be young. His bond to Ginevra Weasley was sealed in the Chamber of Secrets.* He thought.

*First thing I must do in order to help him is to strengthen his belief that I am willing to help him. Therefore, I will make the Headmaster's private library open to him and his friends. I fear, however, the shock might be too much for Miss Granger. All the really fun books are in there.* And that thought cause him to chuckle.

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#### **Amelia Bones office, Ministry of Magic...**

"Director Shacklebolt to see you Minister," said one of the many nameless assistants hoping to get recognized and promoted.

"Send him right in please."

Director Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped into the room. He had inherited the Minister's job when she moved up and was faced with the unenviable task of trying to rebuild the Aurors into an effective fighting force again.

"Minister..." he began.

"Kingsley, we've been co-workers for years. I think we can dispense with the formalities," she said, waving him into a chair.

"Very well Min... Amelia. I wanted to tell you we have forty-five Aurors effective with another nine on light duty. The rest will be out of action for months to come. That's the bad news. The good news is we've counted up a total of 497 Death Eaters, of who 80 managed to survive in varying degrees of insanity. From what we can tell, that represents the bulk of Voldemort's forces. Estimates suggest that our two forces are probably evenly matched at this point; assuming that nothing else goes wrong.

"My primary concern is rebuilding our forces. Even if we accelerate the Auror training program and shave a year off, it will take us two years before we can even begin to flesh out our forces. And we know Voldemort can rebuild his forces quicker.

“That’s the crux of the problem Amelia. We’re in a race, and its one we’re not prepared to run. I doubt Voldemort will give us the time we need.”

Amelia sighed. “What do you suggest we do about it Kingsley?”

“Amelia, I think it’s important that we talk to Potter and see if we can adapt his training methods to help us bulk up faster.”

“I’m already ahead of you on that. From what I understand, Harry will be leaving Hogwarts this Sunday to return to the Weasley’s home in Ottery St. Catchpole. I have arranged for us to visit there, after he’s had a week home to relax. So we’re talking about the later part of June. I realize you’re itching to get started Kingsley, but even you would want a week or two off after that battle.”

“Oh I quite agree Amelia. Besides, a week here or there won’t make much difference. Would you have an objection to my writing him once he’s home and asking if he needs anything to prepare for that meeting?”

Amelia thought that one over. “No, that’s a good idea. He may want to call in other people to help assist at the meeting.”

“Thanks Amelia, I’ll do just that. In the meantime, I’ll get back to my department.”

Kingsley stood and left the room.

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### **The Weasley Twins...**

Remus and Tonks met with Fred and George at their shop. The twins had quickly capitulated to the Marauders and were rather apprehensive about their coming meeting with the Marauders and New Marauders. The meeting was to take place, once again, at Hogwarts.

This time the twins came expecting to be pranked.

The four of them took the shop’s floo to the Three Broomsticks. Both Fred and George were curious about that. Everyone had heard about the now famous battle of Hogsmeade, but there was no sign of any damage. Magic did have its advantages.

Remus and Tonks had a pleasant walk from the town to the school although her leg did ache from time to time. The twins were still so nervous that it was hard to enjoy the pre-summer weather very much, or the polite conversation.

Entering the school, Remus and Tonks escorted them directly to the Room of Requirement.

Inside was a long table. Seated behind it were Harry, Ginny, Luna, Ron, Hermione and a recently released Neville.

Fred and George looked around warily before Harry spoke.

“Come in gentlemen. Take a seat. We have something we’d like to talk to you about.”

Ron and Ginny both were snickering at the significantly thinner hair the two sported.

“Harry we promise...”

“...no more pranks...”

“...we’ll swear an oath...”

“...to you as our dearest...”

“...brother!”

Harry chuckled for a moment. “Fred, George, that’s not why we asked you here today, but I can promise you will not be pranked by us. For today, anyway.”

“Then why...”

“...are we here?”

“Now that is the important question, is it not?” Harry replied. “I know you two have been inducted into the Order of the Phoenix. I also know for a fact that, except for using some of your products, they have never used you on a mission for them. Now, my question to you is a simple one. Would you like to play a more active role in this war? Really make a difference?”

“But Harry we’re already...”

“...doing something for the order...”

“...and we do have a business to run.”

“Quite so! We are respectable...”

“...business men!”

Harry sighed for a moment, then said softly, “Fred, George, I know your secret. Now you wouldn’t want your mum to find out from me, would you?”

“Secret? We have no secrets Harry,” Fred said, indignantly.

Ron leaned forward and looked at Harry, “What secret are you talking about, Harry?”

Harry smirked and buffed his nails before answering, “Oh it’s nothing much Ron. It’s just that your brothers are probably smarter than Hermione and they deliberately failed their OWLS, along with most of their other tests here in Hogwarts. I wonder how Molly and Arthur will take that news?”

Fred and George looked stunned. Hermione looked doubtful and Ron confused, but Ginny tried to hide her smile behind her hand. She knew.

“Oh come on guys. Look at your product line. You’ve developed hundreds of pranks, most far better than anything Zonko’s ever did. Many of those pranks show a surprising degree of work in them. How could you possibly do that and still only take three OWLS? You guys deliberately hid your intelligence in school.”

“He has found us out,” George said sadly.

“Oh quite, but did you notice the implied blackmail?” Fred inquired, looking quite cheerful.

“Yes I did. It’s quite good really, almost as good as a prank!” George agreed.

“Are we sure Dad didn’t sleep with his mother?” Fred asked.

“The green eyes! No Weasley’s have green eyes,” George comment sagely.

“Well, Ginny will fix that,” Fred corrected slyly.

“So what do we do?” George asked his twin.

“He threatened us with blackmail so I say we hear him out,” Fred said with a shrug.

They both turned back to Harry and motioned for him to continue. Ginny was openly snickering.

“Fred, George, I want to kill two birds with one stone here. We have a brother that is currently unemployed and feeling quite depressed at what he’s done. So what I am going to suggest is you turn over your shop for him to manage for you, because you two are going to be too busy to run it yourselves. What I have in mind for you, and Remus has all of the paperwork here for you to sign, is to open a subsidiary of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes that will be dedicated to making stuff to help defend this castle. I want more things like your portable swamps. I want things that will slow down an advancing army of wizards, confuse and confound them. I want to be able to deliver those items from the safety of the castle, without exposing anyone to danger. In short guys, I want you two to put your heads together, talk with Ron and see what you can come up with that will help us defend Hogwarts.”

Fred started to protest. “But Harry, we don’t have that kind of capital! And we’d need to hire on brewers, charm makers, find space for a new facility...”

Harry interrupted him by holding up his hand. “Fred, Remus has the paperwork. He and I are going in half each on this, and we’ll be minority partners. You two will own fifty one percent while Remus and I will own the remaining forty nine percent. We’re prepared to immediately transfer 100,000 galleons to your account for hiring, salaries and supplies, and another 50,000 galleons for the facility. Remus and I both feel that the products you develop will have markets with Wizarding governments in other countries. My primary concern is what’s coming to Hogwarts early next year. But I expect after that, you will have governments around the world banging on your doors to buy your goodies.”

Fred and George gazed at Harry, a maniacal gleam in their identical eyes. When Remus slid a sheaf of documents in front of them, they signed eagerly.

Meanwhile, Hermione was staring at the twins in horror.

“You two deliberately failed your exams?” She said in disbelief.

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### **The Last DA Meeting of the Year...**

Harry hated this. He could see the logic behind Minister Bone’s request that he hand out the awards. And that’s what he had planned on doing, quietly. Dumbledore and the Minister had other ideas, however.

He had received an owl this morning asking if it would be all right if the Minister were present when he handed out the awards. She apparently would be in the school this evening and asked that he do it then. So much for just running around shoving boxes in people’s hands!

Then Dumbledore had come along and told him he’d handle all the arrangements for the presentation this evening, and that Harry should be prepared to meet in the Great Hall, an hour after dinner.

To add to his nervousness, Ron, Ginny and Hermione all seemed to be up to something.

In the Gryffindor common room, after dinner, Ginny told him that she had laid out a dress robe for him to wear. She had removed his bandage yesterday and, while the hand was still very sensitive and sore, she said he should have no trouble getting dressed.

The dorm room was eerily quite as he entered it. No one was there, which was strange. He had figured Ron and Neville would be there getting dressed also, but they weren’t.

Stepping over to his bed, he found a new robe. It was silver gray with a black trim at the cuff. Over the heart was the monogram of a phoenix. He didn’t know where it came from, but it was obvious that Ginny expected him to wear it. It did take him longer than usual to get dressed, but it wasn’t long before he was heading back down to the common room. It was empty.

*Maybe they went on ahead?* He thought.

To be honest, the lack of people was starting to creep him out a bit. Harry hurriedly exited the common room and went down to the Great Hall.

Harry paused when he entered the Great Hall. The tables been cleared away and the room enlarged to allow the entire student population to be seated. What really gave him pause however, were the silver gray robed figures standing in squad formation before the head table.

Ginny approached him, her robe molded to her body like a glove. The robe was nearly identical to his, except for the white cuff, where his was black.



She took his hand and, pulling him forward, murmured, “This is Remus and Jack’s idea Harry. They’re dress uniforms. The color of the cuff indicates what that person does. Jack also wants to talk to you about a uniform that we can fight in.”

He was having a little trouble taking this all in. Ginny looked so beautiful in her robe. The way the phoenix on her robe swelled outward on her was enough to make his breath catch in his throat.

Finally she turned to him and whispered, “Aren’t you listening to me Harry?”

“Um... not really Gin. I can’t get over how beautiful you look in that,” he said shyly.

She beamed a perfect smile at him in return, then pulled him up to the head table where Minister Bones, Dumbledore, several order members, including Molly and Arthur and Remus and Tonks were waiting.

Harry stood next to Ginny, looking expectantly at the head table. Without even realizing he was doing it, he reached out for her hand and gripped it in his.

Minister Bones stood up to address the crowd. She smiled when she saw Harry’s gesture.

“Mr. Potter, for centuries the Aurors have had a tradition of the unit leader handing out the awards to their unit members. From a leadership standpoint, it makes perfect sense for the leader to show his thanks for the performance of a unit member. It also reinforces solidarity within the unit.

Tonight I will be giving you and your leaders their awards. Then you shall hand out the rest, thus passing our Auror tradition to your group. And while I’ve never seen a unit leader holding hands with one of his subordinates on duty, I suppose, in your case, it is appropriate...” She paused while crowd tittered at this, and then motioned Harry forward.

“Mr. Potter, the Order of Merlin is one of our highest honors. Most recipients of the award did not ask for it, and did not want it, which means you’re going to be in very good company...”

He groaned inwardly and knew this was going to be a long night.

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### **Hogwarts Express...**

Word had been passed among the DA that one of the command team would contact them if they were needed over the summer, but other than keeping up with their early morning runs, they were told to enjoy the time off.

To be honest, Harry did have some plans that might end up bringing them together during the summer, but not until August at least. He wanted some time off for himself as well.

The six friends sat in their compartment on the Hogwarts Express. The only real sign that a battle had taken place nearby was the fact that there was a new Stationmaster. Hermione was supposed to go with her parents to the south of France in July, but would be coming to the Burrow in August. Luna and her father were planning a trip to Columbia where they would seek the fabled

miniature Uni-roo, supposedly a cross between a unicorn and a kangaroo. Neville nodded interestedly at hearing that. His plans, like Harry's, were much simpler. He intended to relax, if he could.

Harry sat in the corner of the compartment watching his friends. He had pulled out a sketchpad and was trying to capture some of the images before him. Madam Pomfrey had finally gotten around to telling him that his drawing would help him to work through some of his issues he had with the Dursleys. She gave him a lot of advice on how he should draw things that expressed his emotions, but he found most of that too dark and disturbing, even for him. The one piece of advice he did accept from her was to branch out from his jewelry patterns and crystal drawings into drawing other objects. The drawings, in Harry's opinion, really weren't very good. But he kept at it.

Ginny had just finished playing some exploding snap with Hermione and glanced over to see Ron and Neville engrossed in a game of wizard's chess, and Harry in his book again! He had been sketching in that book for nearly two months now and no one, absolutely no one, had managed to get a look at it. He had it charmed so the pages were blank as long as he wasn't using it. She knew, she had snuck up to his dorm to try to take a peek at it.

Noticing that Ginny's attention was on him, Harry started to put his book away. She stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Harry, you've been drawing in that book for weeks now and you won't show anyone what's in it. I don't think it's very fair of you, keeping secrets from us... come on, let's see it."

"Gin, I'm just doodling. It's not very good. It's just that Madam Pomfrey said I should do this... you know... to help me work through issues. I tried doing what she suggested, but it didn't really make me feel better, so I started doodling other things instead."

'Issues', was Harry-speak for the Dursley's, and what they did to him. The rest of them knew that.

"Harry," she asked softly, "may I please see it?"

Seeing the concern and love in her eyes, he released the charm on the book and handed it to her.

Flipping through the first few pages, Ginny shuddered at the dark images. A cupboard with a small figure in it, a hand holding a belt, a window with bars. But after the first few pages, the images changed radically. There were several homes of varying types, from modest to palatial. Ginny's eyes widened as she started to spot herself intermixed in the images.

There were others as well. Neville and Luna, sitting at a table in the Great Hall, laughing, Ron on his broomstick, Hermione with her books. Ron and Hermione walking down to the lake, holding hands.

She blushed when she found one of herself that had obviously been a nude drawing, with a bathing suit tastefully drawn over her body at a later point. She knew for a fact Harry had never seen her in a bathing suit!

She glanced up at Harry and he shrugged. "I knew sooner or later you were going to insist on seeing it, or showing it to others. Besides, that's an image I'll always have right here." He tapped his head.

The train started to slow as it pulled into Kings Cross. From his window he could see Molly and Arthur and the Grangers waiting for them. Harry's trunk was in his pocket, like the others. With the waiver to perform magic this summer, they all took advantage of it.

The six of them piled out of the train, eager for the summer to begin; although Ron and Hermione were saddened by the time they would be away from each other. Neville and Luna said their farewells to everyone and turned to leave. Neville's Gran was picking up both of them, and she was in a hurry.

Harry and Ginny walked over to Molly and Arthur while Hermione and Ron went to the Grangers. Molly engulfed them both in bone crushing hugs, then the two adult Weasleys turned to watch their son. Molly had tears in her eyes and Arthur looked like he was bursting with pride.

Ron talked for a bit with Hermione's parents, and Hermione showed her mum the ring Ron had made for her. Dan Granger frowned for a bit and looked at Ron like he was eyeing a cut of beef before nodding at him and smiling at his daughter. Hermione threw herself into her father's arms, nearly knocking him off balance, and then went over to Ron. The two embraced and kissed passionately.

Ginny looked up at Harry with a wistful look. He smiled and leaned down to give her a tender kiss, then murmured in her ear, "Let's allow them their time Gin. We'll have a whole summer, while our brother will only have a piece of one."

"How'd you get so smart, Mr. Potter?" she asked softly.

"Didn't you know Miss Weasley? All us Weasleys are smart!" He smirked.

When Ron joined them, Molly again issued one of those patented bone-breaking hugs. Even Arthur gave him a hug.

Then Molly turned to Harry and Ginny. "Well? You ready to go home?"

"I don't know about Ron and Ginny, but home sounds real good right about now," Harry said, happily.

## FINIS

And thus ends our tale of Dumbledore's Army, an Angsty, Romancy, Adventure tale. We will pick up this tale in our sequel. [Harry Potter and the Spiritus Crystalus](#)

My wife and I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as we've enjoyed writing it. Now if you'll excuse us, we need to walk the feeling back into our legs and argue over who gets the bathroom first!

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